CONAN

in Shadows in the Skull by L.Sprague de Camp & Lin Carter

February 1975

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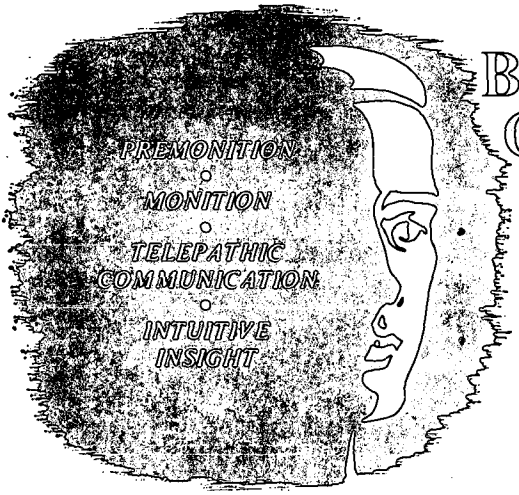

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TED WHITE

editorial

DISCON 1974: The 1974 World Science Fiction Convention is just over as I write this, and it was—as usual—an exhausting and exhilarating experience. The convention started on Thursday, August 29th, and concluded on Monday. September 2nd. In those five days time was looped and encapsulated and a month or more occurred.

The Discon was large—the largest yet, in fact. Here are a few statistics: over four thousand five hundred people joined the convention; Chairman Jay Haldeman (Jack C. Haldeman II to readers of AMAZING and FANTASTIC) estimates that actual attendance, including gatecrashers, topped 5,000. That's a lot of people to put in one hotel, and in fact not all of them stayed at the Sheraton-Park. The convention hotel rented over 1,100 rooms to conventioneers and the Shoreham, across the street, rented another 300 rooms to the overflow crowd. Although a few other functions took place at the hotel—a wedding, for instance—it was for all intents and purposes the convention's. Regretably, the hotel chose to take advantage of this fact. The food available in the hotel was uniformly dreadful and horribly overpriced (frankfurter and french fries: $1.75) and there were rumors of other hassles as well. But the convention committee kept most of the problems off-stage; aside from the food situation I doubt most Discon members were even aware of them.

It was an easy convention to enjoy and I heard few complaints from attendees; I have none myself.

The Awards Banquet was less than a total success, but this was due to the apparent inexperience of the toastmaster (who shall, in charity, go nameless here) whose rambling monologues lacked either wit or punchlines and seemed to go on forever—to the extent that Harlan Ellison was finally goaded (encouraged by those sitting near him with cries of "Kill! Kill!") to interrupt him for a brief (off-microphone) warning that he was rapidly losing his audience. This year the convention committee decided not to announce the runnersup for the awards—a mistake, I think—but here, for the record, are the winners:

Best Novel: *Rendezvous With Rama* by Arthur C. Clarke

Best Novella: "The Girl Who Was Plugged In" by James Tiptree, jr.

Best Novelette: "Deathbird" by Harlan Ellison

Best Short Story: "The Ones Who Walk Away From Omelas" by Ursula K. LeGuin

Best Professional Editor: Ben Bova

Best Professional Artist: Frank Kelly Freas

Best Dramatic Presentation: Woody Allen's *The Sleeper*

(cont. on page 118)

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Conan has made three previous appearances here with "The Witch of the Mists" (August, 1972), "Black Sphinx of Nebthu" (July, 1973) and "Red Moon of Zembabwei" (July, 1974). Now he completes the quartet of novelettes which, together, make up Conan of Aquilonia, *as he faces his age-old and implacable enemy, Thoth-Amon, for the final time among the–*

SHADOWS IN THE SKULL

L. SPRAGUE DE CAMP & LIN CARTER

1. Visions in Smoke.

A WISP OF GREEN SMOKE crawled from the bed of glowing coals whereon Rimush, the royal soothsayer of Zembabwei, had cast the throbbing heart of an ibis, the blood of a bull ape, and the forked tongue of an adder.

The coals shed a wavering, crimson glow. This dim light turned the grim, heavy features of Conan, king of Aquilonia, into a brooding copper mask. As for the black visage of his companion, Mbega, the newly-crowned king of the jungle city, the ruddy, flickering luminance transformed his features into the face of a primitive idol of polished ebony.

There was no sound in the dank, stone-walled chamber, save for the hiss and crackle of the coals and the mumblings of the gaunt old Shemitish conjuror. Rimush huddled in his worn, patched astrologer's robe, embroidered with the mystic symbols of his craft, above the brazier. The firelight gave his aged head the semblance of a white-bearded skull, wherein only deep-set eyes lived and moved.

Conan stirred restlessly. He disliked all meddling with magic and divination and witchery. His simple faith was long since given to the grim, barbaric god of his distant northern home: Crom, who made few demands upon his followers but who breathed into them the strength to slay their enemies.

"Enough of this mummery!" he growled to Mbega. "Give me a legion of your warriors and I'll comb the jungles for Thoth-Amon myself, without wizardry!"

The giant black warningly touched Conan's shoulder, nodding at the aged astrologer. The soothsayer convulsively stiffened, champing his jaws. The whorl of green vapor climbed, eddied, and formed an arabesque the color of jade. Beads of foam appeared at

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the corners of Rimush's mouth.

"Any moment, now," grunted Mbega.

A whisper came from the old Shemite, in which words gradually became audible: "South . . . south . . . beating wings in the jungle night . . . to the great waterfall . . . then east, to the Land Of No Return . . . to the great mountains . . . to the Great Stone Skull . . ."

The whisper was cut off short as the soothsayer stiffened as if stabbed.

"You will find him at the end of the world, where the serpent folk ruled of old, ere the coming of men," said the Shemite in a clear voice. Then he crumpled, sprawling lifelessly at the foot of the smouldering brazier.

"Crom!" growled Conan, the flesh on his corded forearms creeping.

Mbega knelt and fumbled at the old man's breast. After a moment, he stood up, brow wrinkled.

"What's wrong?" demanded Conan, glimpsing a somber fear in the black monarch, whom Conan had helped to raise to sole rulership after Zembabwei had for centuries been ruled by pairs of twins.

"Dead," said Mbega slowly. "As if struck by lightning—or as if bitten by a deadly serpent."

PALLANTIDES WAS as near to open defiance of his lord as he had ever come in his many years of service to the king of Aquilonia. The old soldier cursed luridly as he struggled to rise from the silken couch whereon he lay with his left leg swathed in bandages.

"Heart of Nergal, sire, I'll not have you larking off into the jungles alone without a company of stout Aquilonians at your back! Guts of Dagon, how can you trust these blacks not to break and run at the first flash of steel? Or not to roast and eat you the first time the provisions run short? If I cannot march, with this damned leg I can at least ride—"

Conan caught the general of his host by the shoulder and thrust him back on the couch.

"Crom's blood, old friend, I like it none too well myself," he growled. "But what is is, and what must be, must be! My Aquilonians are worn out from hacking a road through leagues of stinking jungle. Half are out of action from wounds got in taking the city, and the other half from fever and dysentery. I can wait no longer. King Mbega offers me the pick of his troops. If I stay here in Zembabwei, waiting for my own lads to get back on their feet, Thoth-Amon may have crept back to his Stygian lair by then—or perchance fled to Vendhya or Khitai, or the world's edge, for aught I know! The old sorcerer hasn't lost all his magic, you know. So I can wait no longer!"

"But, sire, these black savages—"

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"Are mighty warriors, Pallantides, and let none tell you otherwise!" Conan growled in irritation. "I've lived amongst them, fought with them, and fought against them, until they call me 'the black king with a white skin.' None surpasses them in manhood; my old comrade Juma could take on three of your Aquilonian knights with his bare hands and come out of it grinning. Besides, there are the Amazons."

Pallantides grunted, too wise to argue further. Two weeks before, a company of black women warriors had appeared at the gates of Great Zembabwei to represent Queen Nzinga at the enthronement of Mbega. They were led by Nzinga's daughter, a handsome, swaggering, full-breasted brown girl of twenty, lithe as a lioness and half a head taller than the tallest of the Aquilonians.

Pallantides knew that, more than twenty years before, when Conan had been a Zingaran buccaneer, he had visited the country of the Amazons. There he had known Queen Nzinga—in all senses of the word. Pallantides also knew that Conan suspected the Amazonian princess (who, like all the queens and heirs apparent of her line, bore the same name, Nzinga) of being his own daughter. So the general, wise in the ways of kings and knowing Conan's temper, held his tongue.

Hearing of Conan's plan for an expedition to the remotest regions of the unknown south, where the world came to an end, the younger Nzinga threw down her feather-tufted spear at Conan's feet, offering herself and her woman warriors as allies. Conan had readily accepted.

"But," said Pallantides, trying another tack, "It might be a thousand leagues ere you reach this land of no return, whereof the old astrologer told you. Even Mbega has no maps of that region, nor has any of his folk gone thither and returned to tell about it."

Conan flashed a somber smile. "Right enough, but we're not only marching. We shall ride the wyverns—myself, Conn, and the pick of Mbega's royal guard. When Thoth-Amon escaped on one of the brutes, not all were turned loose; enough of the flying devils were left behind in the topless towers to bear a score of us. We'll fly ahead on wyvern-back while Nzinga leads her warwomen and Trocero commands a company of Mbega's regular spearmen on foot. We'll scout ahead for the best routes. When we sight this Great Stone Skull whereof the Shemite spoke, we'll turn back, await the arrival of our ground force, and strike at once from the sky and the jungle."

Pallantides chewed his beard. "You can't ride those winged devils."

Conan grinned. "I can try. I've ridden horses and camels and even, once, an elephant. So a mere dragon should not daunt

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me!"

2. *A Flight of Dragons.*

CONAN SOON LEARNED that there was much in what Pallantides had said. The giant pterodactyls, which the warriors of Zembabwei reared and trained, were not the most tractable steeds. They were bad-tempered, quarrelsome, and stupid. They had a dismaying tendency to forget their riders and swoop down to the surface of clearings and rivers in pursuit of prey. They also stank.

Conan had snorted indignantly when the grinning black beast-keepers had tied him securely to the high-backed saddle, a stout affair of tough leather stretched over a bamboo frame. But, on his first flight, his grisly mount abruptly tumbled into a headlong dive after a fleeing gazelle. Then Conan realized the need for the thongs that held him to his seat.

The Zembabwans carried stout teakwood clubs, fastened to a loop of the saddle, wherewith to beat the wyverns into obedience whenever their predatory instincts got the better of their training. Conan battered his flying dragon into groggy flight again. He would, he thought, prefer to take his chances afoot in the jungle, with the warriors of Nzinga and Mbega.

Still, there was no denying that the wyverns covered the distance at a speed that left those on the ground far behind. While the black fighters hacked their way through the dense growth below, Conan and his scouting force ranged far ahead, spying out the best routes. Once they sighted a black army, posting itself for an ambush of the ground force. A simultaneous swoop of the wyverns close over the heads of the hostile spearmen sent them into headlong, screaming flight.

After a time, the jungle thinned out to parkland, and the ground force speeded up. Their progress was still snail-like compared to that of the wyvern squadron, which could travel at several times the speed of even a mounted man. And there were no horses in these parts. Conan was told that they were crossing a belt in which a wasting disease slew all horses. Now and then a cluster of black specks on the savannah indicated a heard of antelope, buffalo, or other grass-eaters.

Day after day, Conan soared far ahead of his army. Then he returned to meet his ground force: Nzinga's Amazons, Mbega's warriors under Count Trocero's command, and a train of women bearing food and supplies on their heads. From his height, they looked like a column of black ants. Unable by reason of age to keep up with the brisk marching pace of the warriors, Trocero most of the time was carried in a litter, borne on the shoulders of four stalwart blacks.

Each day, Conan fumed with

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impatience when he saw how little ground the force had covered since dawn, although he well knew that these folk were marching at a rate that even his tough Aquilonian veterans would have had a hard time to keep up with.

THE MOON had been full the night when Conan and his son had overthrown Mbega's usurping co-king Nenaunir, who had seized sole power for himself and imprisoned his twin brother. The moon had dwindled to a silver sliver when Conan and his little army had set out in pursuit of Thoth-Amon.

During this journey, the moon twice waxed to full and shrank again to a slim silver crescent. Now it was again broadening toward the full. To Conan's right, in the west, the haze-reddened sun was sinking toward the jagged peaks that fenced the horizon. In the east, to his left, the pallid moon, in her first quarter, stood well up in the sky.

Five hundred feet below where Conan sat his wyvern, the land was rolling and rough, cut up by many ravines and gullies. It was clad in golden dry grass with patches of scrubby, thorny herbage and trees, now mostly dry, brown, leafless, and dead-looking because the country was in its dry season. Ahead, the hummocks swelled to a range of hills. From the information croaked out by old Rimush before his mysterious death, and from the words of natives queried along the way, he should be approaching the giant waterfall of which Rimush had spoken.

Ere long, his heart leaped with fierce joy as he sighted the misty plume that rose from a cleft in the hills ahead. A few more beats of the reptile's ponderous wings brought him within sight of the white glitter of the fall itself. There a small river, winding out of the hills, plunged over an escarpment half as high as Conan's own altitude.

Conan wondered whether he ought to return to the ground force, now far behind. No, he thought; he would make a cast of a few leagues eastward, as he had been directed by the Shemitish astrologer, and then swing north again. He should be able to rejoin his troops before dark.

So Conan tugged on his reins and turned the flapping monster to the left. Behind him, Prince Conn and Mbega's guardsmen followed his lead.

Conan turned, the wind whipping his gray-shot mane across his face, and peered through watering eyes to where his son rode. Young Conn was grinning. His square-jawed face was eager and his fierce blue eyes were alive and sparkling. Conan, his hard face softening, growled an affectionate curse under his breath.

The lad was obviously having the time of his life. Since he had joined the expedition at Nebthu on the River Styx, he had been

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through desert warfare, a jungle trek, and the siege of Zembabwei. By now he ought to have learned a few things about the task of being a warrior-king. His experience on this hazardous march into the Far South could never have been gained from tutors or books. Conan decided that he had been right to ignore the advice of his counsellors and bring his son on this expedition.

By late afternoon, the craggy hills rose into bleak plateaus and rugged mountains. This must be the Land of No Return of which old Rimush had spoken. Conan meant to fly briefly over the near side of the mountains, to scout the passes, and then to turn north to rejoin Nzinga, Count Trocero, and their armies. He whacked his wyvern to hasten its flight, since he did not wish to be caught aloft by darkness and perchance miss his rendezvous with the ground force.

The thunder of vast wings sounded on his left. He glanced about to see Conn, his face flushed with excitement, reining up beside him. The lad's dragon, carrying less weight, was less fatigued than Conan's. Conn pointed ahead and to the right.

Following his son's indication, Conan peered through the haze and saw a curious thing. This was a mountain of chalkwhite stone, the lower slope of which had been rudely carved into the shape of an immense, grinning death's head.

Conan's barbarian heritage of superstition rose within him, bringing a gasp of awe to his lips and a prickling of premonition to his skin. The Great Stone Skull, whereof Rimush had spoken!

Conan's blazing blue eyes stabbed through the murk. Ahead, a flat, barren stretch of dead earth stretched to the foot of the cliff. There, the black arch of a portal yawned. Its lintel was carved like the fanged upper jaw of a skull. From the upper works peered two round ports, like the eye sockets of a skull. It was an eerie thing to see.

Then terror struck!

A shock ran through Conan's burly frame, leaving him gasping and trembling with unaccustomed weakness. His senses swam; his heart labored, as if he had flown into an invisible cloud of poisonous vapor.

The same weird force affected his reptilian mount. The wyvern staggered, slipped to one side, and hurtled toward the sterile plain below, where the white skull brooded starkly over a haunted, shadowy land.

3. *Land of Illusions.*

CONAN JERKED BACK the reins with a heave that would have broken a horse's jaw. The wyvern responded sluggishly, its red eyes dimmed, its snaky tail hanging limply. But respond it did, as its ribbed wings opened to catch the rushing wind and brake its headlong fall.

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The groggy reptile came to earth with a thunder of batlike wings. Conan hastily untied the thongs that bound him to the saddle and sprang to the grassy ground below, shaking his head to clear his groggy wits. Had the wyvern flown through some updraft of noxious gas?

He peered aloft. The others of his scouting force had encountered the same aerial barrier. One by one, their stunned mounts tumbled from the sky. Foremost among these was Prince Conn. He dangled limply from the saddle-thongs, white face blank and senseless.

Conan's gut-muscles tightened. The taste of fear was like vile brass on his tongue, oily and sour. Sweat started in cold globules from his brows as he watched his son plummet towards the ground. The aging king growled a wordless, beseeching cry, scarred fists clutching and closing helplessly on empty air.

Then the rush of clean air seemed to rouse the fainting lad; his dulled eyes took in the blurred vista of dead earth swooping up towards him. Those eyes blazed with the unquenchable fires that flamed in the gaze of his mighty sire. Recognizing his danger in an instant, the boy flung every ounce of vigor his lithe young thews contained, jerking back the reins, snapping the winged reptile to semi-alertness even as Conan had done a moment earlier.

Relief gusted through the king of Aquilonia as he watched his son bring the reptile lurching drunkenly—but safely—to earth. He sprinted to where Conn slumped in the saddle, shaken but safe. Conan ripped loose the thongs, helped Conn to earth, and crushed the boy in a fierce, inarticulate embrace.

Not all of the aerial party were so fortunate. Two of Mbega's guardsmen failed to recover from the effects of the wizardly sky barrier. They crashed to earth with a sickening crunch of snapping bones. The rest, however, managed to bring their numbed reptiles floundering to earth, though sometimes with bone-shaking impacts.

Conan's wits sharpened as the lingering effects of the uncanny barrier faded. He became aware of something wrong. Conn sensed the strangeness, too, and pointed in wordless amazement.

From aloft, they had seen a dead plain of sterile earth or sand, stretching to meet the face of the white mountain, which was grotesquely hewn into the likeness of a grinning skull. Now they stood knee-deep in the lush grass of a velvety meadow, spangled with small flowers, white and blue and scarlet. In the middle distance, a herd of long-horned cattle placidly cropped the herbage. The meadow sloped away up to the cliff as before.

But now that cliff presented a wholly different aspect. Conan's

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volcanic gaze narrowed and a tingle of supernatural awe prickled his nape. For the cliff, which from the air seemed to have been carven into the form of a skull, now appeared as the façade of a splendid, ornate palace.

Across the front of the cliff marched a row of slender pilasters. These upheld a broad architrave carved in reliefs of nymphs and satyrs and many-headed gods. From the center of this architectural mass jutted a shady portico, in back of which a tall portal led into the interior of the cliff.

Conan's face mirrored his disbelief. The burly barbarian trusted his senses; but now he wondered which was the illusion: the skull-shape seen from aloft, or the exotic, ornate splendor that now confronted him. He asked himself whether the barrier into which he had flown might not have been made of some mephitic gas, which blurred his sight or cast illusions upon his mind.

Behind him, Mbega's blacks, having recovered from the effects of the aerial barrier, were dismounting and hobbling their reptilian mounts.

Still doubtful, Conan bent to touch the swaying grasses, his massive, scarred hands awkwardly gentle with the small, starry flowers. He lifted his head, drawing the clean air deeply into his lungs. The heavy smell of perfumed flowers and of lush grass was strong in his nostrils.

He peered at the cliff. In the ruddy light of the setting sun, veins of quartz sparkled; the ornate white-marble façade was clear and distinct to his eyes. Every detail was sharp and unambiguous.

He shrugged. It may have been a zone of poisonous vapor that had stimulated fantastic visions; or else . . . But nothing was to be gained by standing here in speculation. Conan's bent was to resolve such puzzles, not by arguing theories with himself, but by investigating the source of the enigma at first hand.

As he started forward, a sharp cry of *"Angalia!"* made him turn. It was Mkwawa, the officer in command of the guardsmen, pointing. Spear points came up, their copper blades flashing redly in the setting sun as the warriors snapped to alertness.

Figures were drifting through the pillar-fronted palace, coming toward them through the swaying grass. They were women: dusky, sinuous, with smiling red lips and eyes like black jewels. Little crystal bells were woven through the coils of their hair, so that each lithe figure was surrounded by a faintly chiming music. The were young, well-formed, and thinly veiled.

Mkwawa looked a question at Conan. The king frowned, then shrugged.

"The beasts are still groggy from the bad air we flew through," he said. "Let us give them a rest ere we venture aloft

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again. Meanwhile, perchance we can learn something from these women, who do not seem dangerous. Tell off half your men to go with me as a guard, whilst the rest care for the wyverns. Detail one man to fly back to the army, to set them on our trail."

The black officer snapped out his orders. Presently Conan, Conn, and their dozen guardsmen started for the enigmatic cliffside palace. Conan tugged the ends of his fierce mustache in thought. His face settled into an impassive bronzen mask, but inwardly he was troubled. Was this an elaborate trap? He had not lived to reach his late fifties without acquiring a strong vein of wary suspiciousness. Something, certainly, was wrong about a place that changed its entire appearance in a few heart-beats.

4. *Golden Wine.*

IT WAS THE EVENING of the third day after Conan's arrival at the rock-cut palace—actually, a small cave-city. Its name, he had learned, was Yanyoga. Queen Lilit had promised the visitors a splendid feast as soon as she could make the arrangements, and the time of the feast had come.

On the marble floor of a great hall, among a select company of the queen's kinsmen and ministers, Conan sprawled on a nest of silken cushions and worked away at a horn of honey-hearted wine. The barbarian felt curiously lazy and relaxed. His belly was filled with subtly-flavored viands. The golden wine was thin and cold, and through his veins it sang its heady song. To one side of the hall, Conan's black guardsmen also feasted.

Beyond, wearing his meticulously polished cuirass, young Conn sprawled on the cushions. He ogled a troop of dancing girls, whose sinuous bodies wove a graceful sequence of suggestive postures. Their only garments were strings of beads about their waists and loins. Conan grinned indulgently at his son's fixed gaze but said nothing. 'Twould be only a matter of time before the lad broached his first maidenhead. Conan had not been much older when he began his roamings, in the course of which he had quickly shed the grim puritanism of a Cimmerian village.

The queen of this cavern-palace, Lilit, sat apart from her guests on an onyx dias. Although Conan had questioned her at length, she professed to know nothing of Thoth-Amon or of the skull-like appearance of the cliff as seen from the air. This land, she explained, had many geysers and fumaroles, whence noxious vapors seeped into the air from underground chambers.

That explanation, Conan thought, would have to serve for the time being, albeit his suspicions were not altogether lulled. Still, Queen Lilit, speaking the Shemish trade language current

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among the black nations, had told a plausible story of how she and her subjects came to be there.

A few centuries before, she said, a mighty king in Vendhya had sent forth a fleet on a trading mission to Iranistan. A typhoon had blown this fleet far off its course across the Southern Ocean, and the battered survivors had made landfall not many leagues from where they now were. They had found a race of small, yellow-skinned aborigines, whom they had enslaved and who now served them as serfs. The men of the expedition had wedded the slave girls who had been sent from Vendhya as part of the cargo. These folk and their descendants had carved Yanyoga out of the soft, chalky rock of this cliff face.

The palace, Conan thought, was really too ostentatious and exotic for his taste, for he preferred a more austere style of life. The royal palace in Tarantia, built on a magnificent scale by his unlamented predecessor Numedides, was itself too showy for his liking. In his private apartments in the palace, he had long ago banished the silken draperies and carpets and the be-jewelled sculptures, preferring bare stone walls and rush-strewn floors like those he had known as a boy in his rugged Cimmerian homeland.

This place savored of those he had seen in his early manhood: the palace of King Yildiz of Turan, whom he had served as a mercenary, at Aghrapur; that at Shamballah, the capital of the mysterious valley of Meru, beyond the lonely steppes of Hyrkania; and that of King Shu of Kusan, in far Khitai. Here, too, were lavishly ornamented, fantastically carven walls, columns, and lintels. Remembering his brief enslavement in Shamballah, the City of Skulls, Conan lost himself in a reverie over old times and lost comrades and distant wars. Or was the honey-flavored wine befuddling his wits?

He fell into a light doze. Thus he did not notice when Conn, after stealing a quick glance at his nodding sire, slipped from his place and quietly left the hall.

Nor did he see the gaunt, grim-faced, swarthy man who observed all with gloating eyes from the shadow of a column. This man's wasted form was swathed in faded emerald green. Although he had, to the eye of the beholder, aged by decades since their last meeting, Conan would have known him at once as his ancient foe, Thoth-Amon.

CONN WAS YOUNG and lusty, and his blood ran hotly. One dancing girl in particular had caught his eyes. She was some years older than he, with full breasts like golden fruit and red lips ripe for kissing. Her jewel-bright gaze held his, and her gliding body was all warm animal flesh.

When the dance ended, the

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boy observed how the girl lingered, looking back at him from the shadow of a distant pillar. Catching his eyes from across the hall, she had licked her lips and run her hand over her belly and thighs in a suggesting manner.

Inwardly trembling, Conn wove through the feasters after the dancing girl. It was now or never, he thought.

He was not altogether ignorant of women. Back in Aquilonia, more than one buxom kitchen maid or serving girl had sought to catch the eye of the king's son. Beyond a few inexpert caresses and flustered kisses, however, none of these liasons had culminated in what Conn, like most boys, regarded as the ultimate test of manhood. Well, this was his chance to prove his masculinity at last!

The girl was still standing in the shadow of the column. He slid his strong young arm around her slender waist and drew her to him, trying to plant a kiss, but she laughed and eluded his efforts.

"Not here!" she breathed. "The Queen . . ."

"Where, then?"

"Come—"

Slipping out of his embrace but sliding her fingers into his, the girl led Conn through the entrance of the hall into the dim wilderness of corridors and chambers beyond. Without even thinking of a possible trap, since his brain teemed with images of quite another sort, the boy followed her into the darkness.

One by one, the other feasters also rose and departed, leaving Conan dozing alone on his cushions. The honey wine made a puddle on the marble floor where the great buffalo horn had fallen from his lax fingers.

Slender, swarthy serving men appeared in the almost empty hall. On silent feet they glided among the cushions abandoned by the absent feasters. The black guardsmen had left their copper-bladed spears and bronze battle-axes and hardwood clubs behind, not thinking to need these in the amorous encounters they expected. One by one, the serving men gathered these up, passing them out of the hall. Two went to where Conan lay snoring on his cushions. Supple hands relieved him, too, of his Aquilonian longsword and dagger.

The serving men glanced up to where Queen Lilit sat enthroned, observing all with a small, secret smile. In a sibilant, whispering language very different from that wherein they had conversed with their guests, the queen and her servants spoke. They and Conan were the only persons left in the hall.

Lilit rose and glided gracefully down the steps to where Conan sprawled, drunkenly snoring. From the servant who held the Cimmerian's weapons, she selected the long poniard. Drawing the weapon from its sheath,

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she smiled down at the oblivious Cimmerian.

Then, quick as the flick of a serpent's tongue, the blade flashed towards his heart.

5. Children of the Serpent.

IN THE DIMNESS of a secluded apartment, lit by a pair of flickering rushlights, Conn caught the slave girl in his arms. His hot panting kisses fell on her neck and shoulders as he forced her down upon a divan draped with silken stuffs.

Pausing above the reclining dancer, the prince cast off his girdle and tugged impatiently at the fastenings of his cuirass. This armor was a back-and-breast of highly-polished steel. It was a little tight, since Conn had grown in the twelvemonth since the royal armorer had hammered it out to his measure. It was the first piece of plate armor that Conn had owned. His pride in that cuirass had led him to spend many hours, when the rest of the Aquilonian force was resting from its arduous trek, in polishing it free of any trace of rust.

While the naked girl writhed languidly, purring, on the divan, Conn at last got the straps unbuckled. He squirmed out of the cuirass. Too fond of the armor to drop it carelessly on the floor and mar its silvery surface, even in this moment of passion, he set it down carefully.

As he did, in the feeble illumination of the rushlights, he saw the reflection of the girl in the polished surface of the breastplate. And in this mirror he saw the girl as she really was.

The girl's body was still human—though less so than it had appeared to his direct vision. But atop that body, where a smiling face should have been, was a mask of spine-chilling horror. For the head of the girl was the scaled, slope-browed, wedge-shaped head of a snake, with lidless, slit-pupiled eyes, fanged jaws, and flickering, forked tongue.

CONN ACTED without thought. Millions of years of primitive instinct lay in the deeper, dormant layers of his mind. One look into those soulless eyes, and a thousand aeons of primordial instinct were triggered into life.

The boy sprang away from the couch to where his girdle lay. Steel rasped against leather as he tore his sword from the scabbard and sprang forward again. Light winked on the gleaming steel as Conn, white-faced with horror, drove the blade between the soft, round breasts of the serpent-woman.

He drew the sword out, dripping blood, and drove it in again and again.

The girl died, but not easily. She died in long, writhing spasms. As life ebbed, her body lost much of the human semblance it had worn. Dull-gray

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scales took the place of warm brown skin. Conn turned his eyes away, revolted, before the final revelation. Dropping his sword with a clatter, he stumbled to a corner and was suddenly sick, in an uncontrollable spasm of revulsion.

When it was over, he felt weak but purged. His mind cleared. Now he knew what it was all about. The girl-thing had lured him outside, as others of its kind had doubtless lured away Mbega's blacks and perhaps his father as well. They had lured them into an amorous embrace, in order to open their serpentine jaws and sink envenomed fangs into their deluded would-be lovers.

Perhaps he alone had escaped the toils of this uncanny trap, all because the magical illusion could not be reproduced in a reflecting surface. This illusion was like a meticulously detailed mirage, superimposed on reality.

Conn's brain reeled as he strove to understand these revelations. He knew the ancient myths of the serpent-folk. The god of the Aquilonians was Mitra the Light-Bringer, who in the legends of the West had slain Set the Old Serpent. But the reality behind the legend was older and grimmer.

It has not been the sword of an immortal god who had crushed down the Snake of Old Night, but ordinary men, battling the hissing minions of Set in a million-year war. The first men, newly sprung from the apelike forebears, had at first groveled beneath the lash of their serpentine masters. From this state of thralldom the heroes of the dawn had risen, to break their shackles and to lead their people to many hard-fought victories.

The serpent-folk, the old myths whispered, had received from their father, Set, the power to becloud the minds of men, so that to human eyes they looked like ordinary human beings. Kull, the hero-king of ancient Valusia, had narrowly triumphed over the arisen serpent, when he discovered that the reptile folk were living unsuspected amidst the very cities of men.

Now, it seemed, the last survivors of this age-old war had fled the length of the world to its uttermost rim. Here, in the unknown mountains between the jungle and the sea, they had bided their time unmolested.

The boy's eyes flashed with the realization that he, alone of all men living, had guessed the secret.

6. *The Skull-Faced Man.*

"HOLD!" thundered a deep voice.

Lilit's hand was arrested in midair as the resonant command rolled through the incense-misted hall. The point of the dagger halted inches from Conan's breast.

Queen lilit turned to confront the guant, stooped figure,

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swathed in robes of faded and spotted emerald-green, who had interrupted her slaying of the unconscious Cimmerian. Her lips writhed back, exposing sharp white teeth. Eyes like dark gems flashed malignant fires. The pointed tip of a pink tongue flickered between her teeth.

"Who commands here, Stygian? You or I?"

Thoth-Amon faced the queen unwinkingly. Age had come upon the archimage since Conan had smashed the Black Ring in the battle at Nebthu months before. With the loss of his power base, the earth's mightiest sorcerer had ben harried south before the iron legions of Aquilonia—south to Zembabwei, where his last human ally reigned on a bloody throne.

Now the sanguinary reign of the wizard-king Nenaunir had been toppled in flame and thunder. Again Thoth-Amon fled before the Cimmerian's vengeance. Conan had pursued him to the world's uttermost edge.

With each defeat, Thoth-Amon's centuries bore more heavily upon him. Now his form was old, shrunken, and frail. His face was like a skull, the dusky skin wrinkled and leathery. But still his burning gaze held terrific power; still his voice, backed by the unyielding iron of a disciplined will, was an insidious tool of persuasion.

Hither he had fled to take refuge with his last allies, the prehuman serpent folk. For centuries he had held them pent in this southern realm. He held them back by bribe and division and magical spell; for, though he and they both worshiped mighty Set, he had no intention of letting them regain their rule over the human race. The empire of evil he dreamed of rearing over the West, he intended to rule alone.

Now, however, he had lost all his human confederates. In desperation, he had sought the homeland of the serpent folk, offering himself as an ally instead of an opponent. They had taken him in—not, he knew, from friendship or compassion, for these sentiments were alien to their kind—but to use him in rebuilding their long-vanished empire. His sovereignty over the servants of Set he had lost; but Conan of Aquilonia he was determined not to lose.

"Vengeance is mine, Lilit," he said, his somber gaze unreadable. "In all else, I yield to you; but in this I am adamant. The Cimmerian is my captive."

The serpent-woman eyed him obliquely. "I know your cunning heart, jackal of Stygia," she hissed. "You think to sacrifice him to Father Set and thus, by offering the greatest champion of Mitra on earth, to regain the favored position your failures in the past have lost to you. But I, too, have plans for the Cimmerian—"

Those plans, however, were never revealed. Even as the queen opened her mouth to utter

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them, she staggered from a sudden blow from behind. With unbelieving eyes, she stared down at the point of a bronze-bladed spear protruding, scarlet and dripping, from between her breasts.

Her spine arched, while her frozen features blurred and dissolved into the head of a serpent. She fell forward on the dais, writhing in slow, undulant spasms of death. Thoth-Amon turned quickly to confront the band of gigantic black women who had burst suddenly into the shadowy hall.

"By Mamajambo's war club!" exclaimed the princess Nzinga, wrenching out the spear she had thrown "We have come just in time!"

THE GRAY-BEARDED Trocero, followed by a file of Mbega's warriors, crowded into the hall, to see Nzinga bending over the slowly writhing body of the dying serpent-queen.

"What monstrous sorcery is this?" she demanded of him fiercely. "We see from a distance a cliff like a great skull; but, when we come nigh, it changes to a gorgeous palace, and the dry soil changes to a lush meadow. Now we find the lord Conan snoring like a besotted drunkard, and this woman-thing bending over him with a knife, and an old man in green—"

"Thoth-Amon, by all the gods!" gasped the count.

"Oh, aye?" the black girl murmurred, absently, her gaze turning again to the figure that writhed slowly in its death-spasms on the steps before them. "And what hell-spawned devil is this?"

Trucero's fine features were drawn and harrowed. His voice sank to a thin whisper.

"*The–snake–that–speaks*!" he muttered.

The girl turned fierce eyes on him, her hand flashing to hilt of her broadsword.

"Old man, you speak of that which no man should name aloud! Can it be, though, that the old black myths were—true?"

"The proof of it lies wriggling at your feet," the Aquilonian noble said quietly. "Look! Even as we fence with words, it *changes*—"

The Amazon girl watched as long as she could, then turned away and shut her eyes as if to blot the memory from her very mind. On the steps before them, the unthinkable monstrosity that had been a queenly, radiant, voluptuous woman, died.

And then it was that the hissing hordes fell on them, quite suddenly, from the shadows of the collonade. And Trocero and Nzinga had work to do with spear and knife and sword, and were too busy for further speech.

In the swift succession of inexplicable events, neither the Aquilonian nobleman nor the Amazonian warrior-girl had noticed the strangest and most inexplicable fact of all.

Conan and Thoth-Amon were

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nowhere to be seen.

Both the sprawling, unconscious Cimmerian and his sorcerous arch-enemy had vanished, as if they had melted into thin air.

7. At the Edge of the World.

CONAN AWOKE suddenly suddenly from his drugged slumber. He came awake all at once, like a cat, whose delicate senses have been roused to alertness by the presence of a foe. The Cimmerian had retained this savage trait through all the long years from his boyhood in the northern wastes. Decades of kingship over a sophisticated realm had laid but a thin veneer of civilization over his primitive soul.

He lay still while his keen senses tested his surroundings. To his ears came the dull boom of waves pounding a rocky shore. His nostrils tasted the air and detected the salt tang of the open sea.

Opening his eyes to slits, he saw that he lay sprawled on damp sand amidst huge boulders. Above him arched the purple skies of night, ablaze with huge stars; among these the moon, nearly full, shone like a silver shield. The moonlight silvered the billows of an unknown sea.

From a brief glance at the starry skies, Conan knew that this sea stretched away to the south. But, as far as his smoldering gaze could penetrate the murk of night, he could see no land. It was as if he lay at the world's very edge, and the shore thereof was washed by the endless seas of eternity. How had he come hither?

He rose to his feet and peered around him. Then his gaze was riveted by a figure that stood on a massive rock above him.

The man, once tall and commanding, had dwindled and become bent and shrunken. His shaven pate and strong-boned, hawklike face had been stern and kingly; now the flesh had fallen away, leaving his head as gaunt and grim as a skull. His faded, tattered green robe showed gray in the moonlight.

A hand like a withered claw clutched a talisman in the form of a carven hem against the bony breast of the silent figure. Around the middle finger of this hand was coiled a massive ring of copper, in the form of a serpent folding its tail in its jaws. Weird fires in the heart of the gem cast a flickering light on his sunken features. From sunken sockets, Thoth-Amon's dark eyes burned into Conan's, who had felt the force of these probing, uncanny orbs before.

"We meet again, dog of Cimmeria!" said Thoth-Amon in a thin voice.

"For the last time, jackal of Stygia!" growled Conan.

He had been disarmed, but the strength that slept long his massive arms and shoulders was

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enough to break the gaunt, bent, weary figure of his ancient foe. Conan, however, made no move against the other. He knew the powers that Thoth-Amon could command with a word, a gesture, an effort of will, and he respected these powers.

He was curious to learn why Thoth-Amon had brought him to this beach at the brink of the known world. While he lay in drugged slumber, the master-magician could easily have slain him. But he had permitted him to live and had borne him away to this unknown place with the aid of the unseen demons that still served him. Why?

As if in answer to Conan's unspoken query, Thoth-Amon began speaking slowly, in a weary, listless voice, as if the fires of life burned low in the wasted figure. As he spoke, however, his voice gained in strength, until it recalled the masterful, resonant tones of the Thoth-Amon of old. Conan listened quietly, his arms folded on his mighty breast and his mustachioed face impassive.

"You have hounded me down the length of the world, barbarian dog," said Thoth-Amon. "One by one, you have sundered from me my most powerful allies. At Nebthu, aided by that drunken fool of a Druid, you broke the Black Ring and scattered the wizards of the South, even as you broke the White Hand in dank and wintry Hyperborea. By luck and fate, you toppled the throne of Nenaunir. Now there is no further realm to which I can fly for refuge."

Conan said nothing. Thoth-Amon sighed, shrugged, and continued:

"Here at the world's edge dwell the remnants of the ancient serpent-folk, who ruled the world before the coming of men. The earliest human kingdoms strove with them and broke their power. When by magical illusions they sought to prolong their existence in disguise among men, your own ancestor, Kull the Conqueror, discovered their secret and crushed them once more.

"Long have I known that the last of the primal rulers of the elder world dwelt here in secret, never relinquishing their hope of regaining what they view as their rightful place in the cosmos. From them I gained the knowledge that enabled me to become vicar of Set in the West, charged with the mighty mission of overthrowing the abominable worships of Mitra and Ishtar and Asura. At the same time, I held the serpent folk in check, knowing their insatiable ambition and having no wish to share my own rule with the children of the Serpent.

"My splendid plans you alone have thwarted—how, I know not. You are no priest or prophet or wizard. You are but a crude, ignorant, blundering, boorish adventurer, for the moment tossed high by the waves of fate. Mayhap your degenerate, effeminate

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Western gods have helped you in subtle ways. In any case, you have frustrated all my hopes and driven me from my throne at the center of a world-wide league of magicians, transforming the would-be conqueror of the West into a harried fugitive.

"But all is not yet lost! For unto Set himself I shall offer up your immortal soul in sacrifice. The Slithering God will feast well on the living soul of Conan the Cimmerian. Restored to his favor, I shall unleash the uncanny powers of the serpent-folk in one last, great crusade—"

Then Conan struck. His grim features contorted into a snarling mask, he took two running steps, bounded high, and caught Thoth-Amon's scrawny throat in his massive hands. The impact of his charge hurled the pair off the rock on the other side, to fall locked together to the damp sand below.

Strange was the battle between the champions of light and of darkness, as they fought at the very edge of the world under the blazing stars.

8. Requiem for a Sorcerer.

CONAN'S TIGERISH CHARGE had taken the gaunt Stygian by surprise. Little strength remained in Thoth-Amon's withered form, and Conan should have been able to break his neck like a dry twig. The Stygian's wizardly powers, however, lent him unearthly resources. Even as Conan's fingers locked on Thoth-Amon's fragile neck, one fleshless claw struck Conan's brow with the glimmering gem that the sorcerer had clutched to his breast.

The light, feeble blow glanced from Conan's brow, but its touch was like cold fire. The Cimmerian gasped, his senses swimming, as a numbing paralysis spread along his nerves. Cold waves of blackness engulfed his consciousness. It seemed to the barbarian that he sank through black waters whose bite benumbed his flesh, until his naked spirit alone rose from the vortex of nameless forces on the darkling sands.

Still was Thoth-Amon held helpless in Conan's grip. It was as though the sorcerer, too, had left his fleshy integument behind. Two impalpable spirits, locked in conflict, rose from the vortex into a dim region beyond the world. About them, mist swirled and billowed, gray and colorless. Above them, black stars burned against unearthly skies; the light from them was as cold as the breath of arctic winds.

To Conan it seemed that the gaunt body of the Stygian had turned into a writhing coil of vapor. His own body had become much the same: a thick, curling tendril of some fiery mist. Without limbs, they somehow clung together in bodiless combat, drifting under the gaze of the black stars.

Conan fought as never

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before—not with the iron grip of massive thews but with some impalpable force within his very spirit. Perhaps it was the essence of his strength and courage and manhood that burned in his heart.

In spirit form, Thoth-Amon, too, had strength beyond that which his withered flesh possessed. His blows were like the blast of cold fires of hatred. Beneath them Conan gasped. His strength ebbed; his consciousness dimmed.

Locked in battle, the two drifted beneath the black stars, and ever the power of Thoth-Amon grew while that of Conan waned. Still the Cimmerian clung to his foe with a remorseless grip. He fought on doggedly, although he now clutched the very limits of consciousness. Blackness gathered about his dimming mind.

Then, the coil of writhing vapor that was Thoth-Amon's spirit stiffened and writhed in Conan's impalpable clutch. Thoth-Amon shrieked soundlessly—an awful, hollow cry of agony and despair. The bodiless thing melted in his grasp. It disintegrated and faded into the cold mists of the void.

Conan floated for a time, panting as it were, while strength seeped back into his exhausted spirit. Somehow he knew that the life-force of Thoth-Amon no longer existed.

After a time, Conan came to himself on the sandy shore by the nameless sea. A weeping boy clung to him, begging him to live. He blinked down at the dead thing that lay beneath him, still in the mechanical grip of his aching hands. Then he looked at what the boy had used, and then flung aside:

The sword, soaked to its hilt in black blood. The sword he had given to Conn for his latest birthday. The sword on whose blade, in an idle moment, the old White Druid, Diviatix, had scratched the Sign of Protection . . . the looped cross of Mitra, Lord of Light . . . *the Cross of Life*!

And thus it was that the Last Battle ended. For forty years, Conan of Cimmeria and Thoth-Amon of Stygia had faced each other across the great gaming-board of the western world. And now, at the world's edge, the long duel was over and done.

"He was *killing* you, Father! I didn't know what to do, so I stabbed him . . . And then I thought you were dead, you lay so still!" the boy stammered through his tears.

Conan embraced his son. "It's all right, son. I yet live, though Crom knows I was close to the Black Gates of Death. But they have oped to swallow another's soul, not mine. Look!"

He nodded at the dead man sprawled on the sands. As they watched, the years at last took their vengeance on the remains of the mightiest magician of shadow-haunted Stygia. Thoth-Amon's flesh dried, withered, and flaked away into impalpable dust, till a fleshless skull

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grinned up at them. Then the skull itself became cracked and pitted, while the bones beneath the empty green robe crumbled to powder.

Conan climbed to his feet, turning his back on the remains. He picked up the glimmering gem with which Thoth-Amon had struck him and pitched it far out to sea.

"So end all magical mummery!" he growled. "May it stay at the bottom of the sea for a hundred thousand years!"

9. *Swords Against Shadows.*

"THE GIRL turned into a snake-headed monster and would have bitten me to death with her poison fangs," Conn was explaining, "but I put my blade into her and she died. And when I came back into the hall to tell you, Thoth-Amon was there and the Queen was bending over you, and you were asleep. And then the Amazons came in, and the Princess threw a spear through the Queen, and she turned into a snake-thing, too. But Thoth-Amon and a servant—I couldn't see him very well, but he had horns and was strong as a bull—carried you from the hall, and no one seemed to be able to *see* except me, as if there was a spell on them that hid what was happening from their eyes.

"They took you through a secret panel behind a tapestry and down a long black tunnel cut right through the mountain. Then the other serpent-folk came pouring into the hall. I followed as soon as I could, but when I got outside under the stars I couldn't tell where you were, because there were big rocks all around and I had to search and search . . . and then I found you, fighting Thoth-Amon on the sand, and it was as if you were asleep, like you were fighting in your sleep . . ."

Conan nodded somberly, letting the boy talk it all out, while they retraced the way Conn had come. They found the entrance to the secret tunnel that led through the mountain and back into the skull-palace, where the eerie powers of the serpent-folk had beclouded their minds with shadows and illusions. A distant clamor echoed faintly down the black length of the tunnel; a furious battle was being waged there in the hall of feasting.

Conan's grim lips lightened in a huge grin, and his heart rose lustily within his burly breast. After these uncanny magical battles beyond the world, under the watchful gaze of strange black stars, it would be like food and drink to him to face a foe of flesh and blood, with clean steel in his hands!

Back there, he knew, Nzinga and her Amazons, with Trocero and the black warriors of Zembabwei, were battling the last of the serpent-people. They were few enough, Crom knew; but the

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Amazon girl was spoiling for a good fight, and so was he. And the serpent-folk, old and weary, had not fought mortal foes for untold ages, secure and confident in their remoteness from the lands of men.

With their queen slain and with Thoth-Amon at last gone down to the cold hells of the unresting dead, they were few, and weaker than they might otherwise have been. No doubt it would be a good, long, hard fight, but Conan grinned at the thought of standing beside the black Amazons in one last battle against world-old foes. He glanced back briefly toward where Thoth-Amon had fallen, thinking: He was the greatest of all the foes I have overcome. I shall miss the old scoundrel in a way.

"Do you still have your sword?" Conan growled.

"No, father, I left it on the beach."

"Give me your dagger and go back and get it, then; I'll wait for you here." While the boy scampered off, Conan hunted around for a good-sized rock. He found a small, egg-shaped boulder about the size of a human skull, hard and flinty. He hefted it, a gleam of approval in his eyes. He hungered to smash in the heads of a few snake-men with it.

Snakes die slow and hard, he knew. But they die at last.

Conn rejoined him, the sword gleaming in his capable young fist. Together, father and son entered the black tunnel and went to join their friends in the last battle against man's oldest enemies.

—L. Sprague de Camp & Lin Carter

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PERCHANCE TO DREAM

ROBERT F. YOUNG

Robert F. Young was a mainstay in these pages more than a decade ago, and has appeared more recently in our sister magazine, AMAZING SF *("No Deposit* No Refill," February, 1974; "New Route to the Indies," August, 1974; "The Decayed Leg Bone," December, 1974). Now he returns to* FANTASTIC *with a remarkable story about dreams, the collective unconscious, the reality of myths, and the healing power of love . . .*

ILLUSTRATED by STEPHEN FABIAN

RANCH FOUND HIMSELF standing before the castle without knowing how he had got there. The fact did not disconcert him: the castle was the first symbol his mind had supplied since his entry into Darkspace, and without symbols, Darkspace—the collective unconscious—could not be perceived.

Actually, the castle was not a true symbol but a symbolic interpretation. It existed, but as something else. Something similar, perhaps, but not quite the same. The dream-drug, Cuiranin, enabled mentally conditioned endo-analysts like Ranch to enter Darkspace whenever they wished and to retain consciousness throughout their stay; but the Noumenon—the thing-in-itself—was as imperceptible to them in Darkspace as it was in Light.

What Ranch did "perceive" was a crude stone edifice consisting of four outer walls, four towers and a domed central structure. Vertical slits functioned as windows in the walls and towers, and each of the latter had a circular balcony near its vertex.

The sky was gray, there was no sign of the sun, and a flat graylit plain stretched horizonward in all directions. Logically, to have reached the castle, Ranch must have crossed the plain, and the dampness of his shirt and the dustiness of his boots seemed to bear this out. But he knew better. He had encountered symbolic realism before, and moreover he felt refreshed rather than fatigued.

In all probability, the plain didn't even exist.

Directly before him a flight of stone steps led upward to the castle's entrance. He mounted them and crossed the threshold. *Déjà vu* touched him, but he knew it was false, that it had been triggered by a parallel rather than a repetition. As an endo-analyst

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he had visited Darkspace many times; but in Darkspace, time per se did not exist: its passage was a purely subjective phenomenon.

The same gray light that bathed the plain illuminated the castle's interior. It had no source—it was as one with the atmosphere. The room into which he had stepped appeared to be a foyer. It contained no appointments, and its gray stone walls were bare. A fine film of dust covered the stone floor, and directly opposite the entrance there was a wide doorway. Ranch walked across the room and stepped boldly into the castle proper. Again, *déjà vu*. He shrugged it aside.

An aisle formed by two rows of massive stone columns stretched before him. He walked to its farther end, found himself on the threshold of the rotunda. It was vast and somehow sepulchral, and filled with the same monotonous gray light that permeated the foyer and the aisle. A crimson carpet led to a round dais located directly below the apex of the dome. The floor consisted of intricate parquetry, its luster dimmed by dust. The concave walls were a study in chiaroscuro, and there were granite benches standing at even intervals along their base.

On the dais, side by side, stood two golden thrones. Seated on the one on Ranch's right was a girl with long yellow hair. She was staring raptly off to her left—ostensibly at one of the granite benches, but to Ranch's practiced

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eye, into nothingness.

Seated on the other throne was an archtypal figure with the head and shoulders of a lion and the torso and limbs of a man. Its mane ran halfway down its back, and it had a long tufted tail. It was naked.

"Come in," the lion-man growled. "I've been expecting you."

RANCH WALKED the length of the crimson carpet and halted at the foot of the dais steps. He could now see the yellow-haired girl in greater detail. She was wearing a blue swept-skirt suit, an azure Easter hat and maroon hose-shoes. There was a slackness about her small face that indicated a state of deep depression. She bore but passing resemblance to the attractive heroine of the holograms turned over to him by the ecto-analyst who had been treating her before dichotomy occurred. This was not wholly because of her depression—the other Naomi was depressed too. It was largely because a sub ego-complex, by its very nature, could seldom project a true facsimile.

Ranch faced the lion-man. "My name is John Ranch," he said. "You said you were expecting me?"

"Yes. Are you her mate?"

Ranch shook his head. "I'm here because I want to help her."

"She doesn't need your help," the lion-man growled. "It is my intention to make her *my* mate once she becomes accustomed to the *Abzu*. My name is En-ki."

"I know," Ranch said. "You were one of the four major deities worshipped by the ancient Sumerians."

The lion-man frowned.

"No doubt you were never aware of them as such," Ranch went on. "Nevertheless, they created you. When they grew more sophisticated they tried to change you by sculpturing anthromorphic statues of you, but you had already concretized in theriomorphic form, and it was you they continued to see in their dreams. They even created a mistress for you. Where is Ninmu now, En-ki?"

"I do not know," growled the lion-man. "Besides, I do not need her any more."

Ranch looked at the yellow-haired girl. "Did your new mate accompany you here of her own free will?"

"Naturally."

"I submit that in her own eyes she did nothing of the sort."

En-ki half-rose from his throne. "You dare impugn the word of a god!" he roared. "You dare—"

Ranch cut him short. "As a wise and just god," he said, "You are of course aware that reality sometimes presents two faces, and would in this instance, if you could, view both so that you might determine which is the more valid?"

En-ki sat back down. "Of course."

"Then you will have no objection if I describe the 'face' your

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mate-to-be saw while you were seeing yours, and explain why she saw it?"

Trapped, En-ki could only glower. "Very well," he growled. "Proceed."

Ranch placed his right foot on the first step of the dais and rested his right elbow on his knee. He had found the position relaxing in similar—parallel—situations, and he found it so now. Ostensibly he addressed the lion-man; in actuality he spoke to the yellow-haired girl:

"The 'face' that Naomi saw was the 'face' of a repetitive dream. She experienced the dream many times before its final culmination, and this is how she described it to the ecto-analyst who subsequently transferred her case to me:

"It is Easter Sunday morning and I am in the rearmost pew of St. Stephen's Cathedral, seated next to the center aisle. In real life I am not a Catholic, but once when I was a little girl I attended Mass at St. Stephen's with my uncle. The priest singing the Mass in the dream is the same priest who sang it that day.

"The auditorium is filled to capacity, but I can recognize none of the members of the congregation. I can see all of their faces, even though I am sitting in the rearmost pew and almost everyone present has their back turned toward me, but in none of the faces can I detect the slightest awareness of my own presence. Nowhere do I see my uncle's face, although I search for it desperately. Its absence should not surprise me, for he died several years ago, and yet it does. He was a kind man, and I know he loved me very much. I loved him too, and yet I did not regret his death, nor did I shed any tears at his funeral. I remember being embarrassed by my mother's grief (he was her brother), which I considered excessive, and to a large extent affected. My father did not attend: for him to have done so would have meant losing a day's work, and neither he nor my mother could see any sense in making such a supreme sacrifice.

"On the Sunday morning in real life when I attended Mass with my uncle there was a lifesize crucifix on the wall beyond the altar, seemingly suspended above the priest's head. In the dream it is absent, and its place has been taken by a large golden wheel, without spokes or hub. I am fascinated by this wheel, and my eyes return to it again and again.

"As I listen to the voice of the priest, which is high-pitched and tinny, and made to seem more so by the English translation of the Mass, I become increasingly aware that as a non-Catholic I do not belong among the congregation, that I am an outsider and am not wanted. This feeling intensifies as I sit there, and finally I can endure it no longer and I get up and slip into the aisle and walk the few steps necessary to

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bring me to the door that opens into the vestibule. It is a double door, and I open one side of it quietly and step through. But I do not find myself in a vestibule, but in a large vaulted chamber devoid of furniture and illuminated by wan gray light. There are no windows, and except for the one I entered by, no doors. A little distance from where I stand a flight of stone stairs lead downward. Without a moment's hesitation, I walk over to where they begin and start descending them.

"Presently I find myself in a deep vaulted basement illuminated by candles burning in niches along the walls. In real life, I have never visited the basement of St. Stephen's. Indeed, I do not even know for certain that there is a basement. My acquaintance with the building is limited to its auditorium, its vestibule and its neo-Gothic façade.

"Arranged along the walls beneath the burning candles are tiers of oblong plastic boxes that I recognize as coffins. Oddly they neither frighten nor repel me, and I walk boldly into the room. Presently I come to a second flight of stone stairs leading downward, and again without hesitation I begin descending them.

"These stairs are different from the ones I descended before: they are cut into the walls of a large well-like shaft and the stairway is in the form of a spiral. The steps are narrow and they are wet with moisture that has seeped through the walls of the shaft. The same wan gray light that illuminated the room adjoining the auditorium also prevails here. Far below, I can make out what appears to be a circular pool of water.

"I am fascinated by this pool, and I hasten my descent so that I may reach it sooner. The shaft ends about fifty feet above it, and a spiral iron stairway takes the place of the stone steps and extends down to the water's edge. My footsteps ring hollowly on the iron steps as I descend them, and the air, cold to begin with, becomes suddenly colder.

"Reaching the foot of the stairs, I pause, I am in a huge crypt-like chamber whose walls are lost in gray shadows and from whose dripping ceiling long stalactites hang. The pool that so fascinated me from above turns out to be a well. It is dark and deep, perhaps bottomless. Several feet to the right of it is a block of obsidian, and coiled upon the block is a golden serpent. Its head is reared, its jaws are open and its fangs are poised to strike. It appears to be a statue.

"As I stand there staring at it, I detect movement in the shadows along the wall beyond the well. Gradually the movement acquires form, and presently an abominable creature with the head and shoulders of a lion and the torso and limbs of a man emerges into the graylight and gazes at me with golden eyes.

"For the first time since the

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dream began, I experience fear. But I experience something else as well–an overwhelming conviction that I have seen the lion-man before, but in a different form. In the dream, I cannot remember where, but the conviction was well-founded: Upon my desk in the public library's Department of Sumerology stands a limestone figurine of the Sumerian god En-ki, unearthed during the Ur excavations of 1998. The figurine has a lion's head and a human torso and limbs. It was assumed by most sumerologists before it came to light that En-ki had always been an anthropomorphic deity; but the figurine proved beyond doubt that in pre-dynastic Ur at least he had been nothing of the sort.

"The lion-man leaves the shadows behind and advances slowly across the floor of the crypt. I try to turn and re-ascend the stairs, but I find that I cannot move. It is as though a part of me stronger than I am wishes to remain.

"The lion-man reaches the opposite edge of the well, still staring at me with his golden eyes. He begins to circle the well. Screams carom from the walls of the crypt, and I know they are my own. The lion-man passes within inches of the serpent's coiled body, and I pray for it to come to life, to sink its fangs into the lion-man's flesh. But it does not.

"The lion-man continues to advance toward me. It is so close that I can smell its fetid breath. It reaches out for me with a huge paw-like hand. As its taloned fingers are about to close around my wrist, I awake.

"Naomi did not seek help till after she had dreamed the dream dozens of times over a period of many months," Ranch concluded. "The ecto-analyst whom she consulted should have foreseen its inevitable culmination and have transferred the case at once to an endo-analyst; but he did not, and it was not till after dichotomy had occurred and the lion-man had transported her sub ego-complex—her dream-self—into Darkspace that my services were solicited."

Ranch looked at the yellow-haired girl he had indirectly been addressing. She had not stirred, nor had she moved her gaze from the granite bench. Through her eyes, the other Naomi—the one in the psychiatric wing of the Clinic—was also staring into nothingness. B.C.—Before Cuiran—her withdrawal would have been incorrectly diagnosed as catatonic schizophrenia, owing to the similarity of the physical symptoms, and she would have been condemned to live the rest of her life, half in Darkspace, half in Light.

En-ki said: "I am not a fool. It is my mate-to-be you have been speaking to—not me. Obviously you think that your words will in some way alleviate the stupor

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which her coming here afflicted her with. But go on: I find your rationalization of reality interesting."

"The dream is neo-Jungian," Ranch said, again indirectly speaking to the yellow-haired girl. "It contains a few Freudian elements—the stalactites, for example—but they are not essential to its understanding.

"Its focus is the well beneath the cathedral. This symbolizes the collective, or mythological unconscious. The basement of the cathedral, the spiral stairway and the crypt represent Naomi's personal unconscious. The golden serpent is almost always present in such dreams: it functions as the guardian of the well, or collective unconscious, but it is also a symbol in its own right.

"I referred to the dream as neo-Jungian. The distinction had to be made, because even though the Jungian symbols are present, Jung himself saw the collective unconscious as a deep place into which the dreamer descended so that he might climb the heights that lay beyond—as a lake or a well, into which he sometimes dived and discovered a rare and wonderful treasure. Naomi's motivation is diametrically different.

"Why *did* she descend through her personal unconscious to the threshold of the collective unconscious? We find the answer in the first phase of the dream.

"The cathedral symbolizes the society of which she is a part, the congregation the members of that society. As a 'non-Catholic', she does not consider herself to be a part of society; in fact, she feels herself to be an unwelcome outsider. The congregation's unawareness of her presence indicates her inner conviction that the real world is indifferent to her existence; her inability to recognize any of the faces of the congregation indicates a deliberate withdrawal from the world.

"Her digression concerning her uncle's funeral provides additional insight into her psyche. She says that she loved him, but that she neither regretted his death nor cried at his funeral. Then she adds that her mother's grief, which she considered excessive and largely affected, embarrassed her. It is obvious from her ambivalence that she was already experiencing the initial stages of psychic dichotomy, and it is equally obvious that the part of her that felt grief felt it so overwhelmingly that she could not cry, that she could not fail to see that her mother's grief was partially put on.

"We come now to the spokeless, hubless wheel hovering beyond the altar, seemingly suspended above the priest's head. This is unquestionably a mandala, or magic circle—the classic Jungian symbol for regaining self-unity. Naomi was dimly aware that within her psyche a new Naomi was being born—a Naomi

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that wanted no more part of the world, a Naomi that wanted to die. Through the archtypal mandala, which the collective unconscious had supplied, she tried to re-unite herself, but she failed, both in the first and in successive dreams; and each time symbolically left the world behind and descended into her personal unconscious—the crypt—to the threshold of the collective unconscious—the well.

"The appearance of ancient archtypes in modern dreams is a fairly common phenomenon. Generally, their nature is determined by the unconscious needs of the dreamer. In Naomi's case, the need was for a god.

"Since in dreaming of the well she had unwittingly created a psychic fistula, there was an excellent chance that the collective unconscious would supply her with a god, and a better than even chance that he might help her. But unfortunately there existed in her endo-psyche a vivid memory of the figurine on her desk in the public library's Department of Sumerology, and it was the memory rather than her Christian predilection that determined the nature of the god in whose personal unconscious the fistula manifested itself, while the god she really needed and who might have helped her was supplied only symbolically in the statue of the serpent.

"Thus, instead of seeing a savior coming to meet her, she saw instead of reactivated archtypal deity out of the mists of mythology, whom she promptly assumed to be her executioner. But it was death through oblivion that she sought, not death through violence, and since she had not reached the point where any kind of death would do, her first impulse was to flee. At first, she could not, because her will to wake—her will to live—was not strong enough. However, for many dreams she was able at the last minute to summon sufficient will, and managed to wake just before the lion-man grasped her wrist. But with each dream her sub ego-complex grew stronger, and eventually the time came when she could no longer *fully* awake. Dichotomy occurred, and the lion-man seized her subself—her dream-self—and transported it through the psychic fistula—the well—to what in his conception of reality is an abyss. The *Abzu* of Sumerian theology."

RANCH MOVED his gaze from the lion-man to the yellow-haired girl. If she had heard a word of his analysis, she gave no sign. He sighed. It had been far too late when he had taken over Naomi's case to reach her through her primary ego-complex—her real self—hence he had journeyed into Darkspace. But he saw now that he could not reach her through her dream-self either.

Nevertheless, before invading the dream proper he would try

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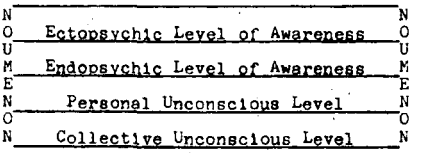
once more. He disliked invading "deep" dreams, not for ethical reasons but for purely practical ones. There was often danger involved, and even when the endo-analyst succeeded in changing the dream he did not cure the dreamer. That had to be accomplished afterward, and if the time-reversal occasioned by the invasion was extensive—as it would be in the present instance—the cure sometimes had to be effected without the dreamer's awareness, and no monetary fee could be exacted.

En-ki was speaking. "If the *Abzu* does not exist, as you imply, and we are not in it, perhaps you will tell me *where* we are?"

"You yourself are where you think you are—in the *Abzu*—the Abyss," Ranch said. "But the sub-Naomi and I are merely in Darkspace. For us, the *Abzu* does not exist as such. But basically, all of us are in—are part of—the Noumenon. The thing-in-itself."

"You talk in circles," En-ki growled. "How can all of us be in the same place and see it as two different places?"

"Primarily because what you regard as reality constitutes the dream-state for the sub-Naomi and myself, while what we regard as reality constitutes the dream-state for you. To compound the difficulty, your sense of time does not correspond to ours." Ranch abandoned artifice and addressed the yellow-haired sub-Naomi directly: "Jung depicted the human psyche in the form of a diagram consisting of a series of successively smaller concentric spheres whose common center he called the collective, or mythological unconscious. In this dark circle, he theorized, lived the collective memories of mankind—gods, dragons, heroes, mandalas, fire-wheels: a Circus Maximus of mythogens belonging to every race of people under the sun. Then, three quarters of a century later, Paul Cuiran combined Jungian psychological theory with Kantian metaphysical theory, modified the Jungian diagram and added one more factor, and subsequently lighted the way into Darkspace. I will project the Cuiranian diagram into your mind, Naomi, but you must remember that although you are seeing four levels, the Noumenon —the thing-in-itself—consists of only one; that the levels merely represent our only means of perceiving it:



"The Ectopsychic Level, of course, is what we commonly think of as 'Lightspace', and the Collective Unconscious Level what we think of as 'Dark'. Although you and I are in Darkspace now, Naomi, our presence here is not the result of a

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physical journey. In one sense, we were here to begin with; we have merely made ourselves aware of the fact through the employment of symbols."

En-ki was laughing uproariously. "Now I can understand your need to rationalize reality," he said. "You are blind! If you had my eyes, you could *see*!"

Ranch studied the yellow-haired sub-Naomi. He studied her for a long time. She was still staring in the direction of the granite bench, no less deep in depression than before. His discourse on the nature of reality had been meant to reassure her, and through her, the primary Naomi in the psychiatric wing of the Clinic. But it was clear that neither his projection nor his words had got through to either.

At length he turned toward the lion-man. "If I had your eyes," he said, "I would pluck them out. They are even bigger liars than mine, and worse yet, you believe the lies they tell."

En-ki was on his feet, his massive face writhing with rage. "Begone!" he roared. "Begone, or I, En-ki, god of the sweet waters, lord of the *Abzu*, will kill you!"

Ranch sighed again. "Why is it, En-ki," he said, "that reactivated archtypes can never remember that in mythology it is always the hero who wins—never the god, the dragon or the giant? But do not fear—*I* will not kill *you*. Indeed, I'm not altogether certain that I could. I will merely inject a brief hiatus into your awareness, which, although it will presently assume the nature of an infinite hiatus, still will not result in your death."

Ranch pulled a pen-size thought-nullifier from his coat pocket and pointed it toward En-ki's eyes. Instantly En-ki's eyes went blank, and he sank to the floor. Ranch did not wait. He climbed the dais steps, stepped over En-ki's body and began searching for the opening that logically had to be in the vicinity of the lion-man's throne. He found it presently. It was directly behind the throne and covered with a stone slab that weighed at least half a ton. He found fingerholds, lifted the slab easily and slid it to one side. Steps cut into the walls of the shaft spiraled downward into graylit depths. He made out the dark waters of the fistula far below.

Before entering the shaft, he looked once more at the yellow-haired sub-Naomi. The felling of En-ki had aroused her from her listless state and she was looking in Ranch's direction. But the blue eyes that seemingly met his were dull with despair and pain, and he knew that he did not register upon their retinas, that his patient still sat hopelessly in her room, staring into space.

OSTENSIBLY En-ki's personal unconscious had much in common with Naomi's. The walls of the shaft were beaded with moisture,

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and the narrow steps were wet and precarious. But Ranch was not deceived: he knew that he was seeing it not as En-ki saw it but as he himself would see it if it were his own.

The shaft extended all the way to the level of the well. When he reached the bottom step, he paused to get his breath. Then he dived.

The ice-coldness of the water shocked him, even though he had been expecting it. He had filled his lungs with air, although there had been no need to, any more than there was need now to hold his breath. Nevertheless, he did so. Employing a powerful breast stroke, he forced himself down, down, down. At length, far below him, he discerned a wan luminescence.

Gradually the luminescence grew stronger. The time finally came when it was no longer below him, but above. With reorientation, came the change.

Now the water was warm, the well like a deep dark pond in summer. He propelled his elongated limbless body rapidly upward with powerful undulations. At last his head broke the surface, and he surveyed the crypt with his ophidian eyes. It was just as Naomi had described it from her dream.

He wriggled out of the well and up onto the block of obsidian. He coiled his golden body and lifted his golden head. He opened his powerful jaws and poised his deadly fangs. Then he froze himself into immobility.

Far above him in the auditorium of the cathedral, the dream was just beginning.

In entering it, he had done so in the only way he could have—as the serpent—and at the only time he could have— when Naomi was beginning to dream it for the first time. In one sense, the dream could not have begun *until* he entered it, because as the serpent he was part of its original context. The fact that it had already run its course, not once but many times, was automatically cancelled out by the time-shift occasioned by his entry.

Presently En-ki emerged from the fistula—not the En-ki Ranch had left lying in the rotunda, but an En-ki who had never seen Ranch and who had yet to see the dreamer whose dream he was invading.

He threw the serpent a cursory glance as he slipped into the shadows. Clearly he deemed it to be a statue, as in a sense it was. Ranch did not think he had encountered it before. He was certain that thousands of Lightspace years had passed since En-ki had last invaded a dream, and the identification of the serpent with the savior was a relatively recent concept.

The endo-analyst bided his time. Like all dreams, Naomi's was a delicate mechanism: it could be successfully tampered with only within its original con-

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text. He listened for the sound of her footsteps on the stairs. As he listened, he experienced thoughts, memories, that were not his own. One of them—a memory—stood out from all the others. As the serpent in innumerable other dreams, he had experienced it many times before.

He was in a garden, coiled round the trunk of a tree. A short distance away a man and a woman stood conversing in a small clearing. Their naked bodies were dappled with golden sunlight and laughter fell from their lips and lingered in their eyes. Looming in the background, half blending with the forest and the sky, was an awesome archtypal figure of which neither was as yet aware.

The memory faded with the faint sound of footsteps on the stairs. They grew louder, and the crypt lent them hollow undertones. Abruptly they acquired a metallic note, and out of the corners of his ophidian eyes Ranch saw her feet—her feet, and then her slender legs; her blue swept-skirt, her coat, her face, and finally her azure hat riding the crest of her long yellow hair.

When she reached the foot of the spiral iron stairway, she paused. She saw Ranch then, and stared.

Suddenly her gaze shifted to the shadows along the wall beyond the well. She gasped, and raised the back of her hand to her mouth.

En-ki stepped out of the shadows.

Naomi screamed.

She could not flee, because she lacked sufficient will to live—to awake. If the dream were permitted to follow its natural course she would find sufficient will, but this would merely expose her to successive dreams—to the ultimate dream in which she would not be able to find sufficient will. Then En-ki—to whom the successive dreams would seem as one—would transport her into Darkspace.

He had already left the shadows behind him. Now he began advancing across the floor of the crypt.

When he reached the well, he paused. Presently he began circling it on a course that would bring him within striking distance of Ranch's waiting fangs.

Naomi was screaming continuously now, and the screams bounced from the walls and shattered into crystalline shards of sound. The lion-man grew closer to the waiting serpent. Ranch prepared to strike. He would discharge just enough venom to render En-ki *hors de combat*. It was the dream Ranch needed to destroy—not En-ki. It was doubtful that he could kill him in any case. En-ki would probably never die till he faded from the memory of mankind.

Ranch struck—

And missed.

At the last moment the lion-

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man had jerked to one side. Now, roaring with rage, his eyes burning like baleful bonfires, he turned upon the serpent and seized it by its golden throat.

Instinctively Ranch coiled his ophidian body around En-ki's barrel-chest.

Naomi's screams faded away. She stood rigidly at the foot of the iron stairway, staring with wide blue eyes at the two archtypal figures struggling beside the well.

For Ranch, the crypt had acquired a reddish cast, and he knew that death was but inches away. He wondered what it would be like to die in someone else's dream, whether, were he to die now, he would awake from his own dream. He could not afford to find out. He tightened his great coils around En-ki's chest, pleased by his prodigious strength. Was it greater than En-ki's? He felt the grip on his throat weaken, knew that it was.

Gasping, En-ki sank to his knees. His hands slipped from Ranch's throat; his eyes began to roll. Instantly Ranch relaxed his coils, and the lion-man fell face forward to the floor.

After uncoiling his golden body, Ranch returned to his place on the obsidian block and looked at the girl. As yet, she had not changed. But the walls of the crypt, the well, the stairway—all were rapidly losing substance, blurring back into the Noumenon. There was little time left.

Fixing Naomi's eyes with his, he projected an image of his human self into her mind and clothed it with an aura of love. To love and be loved—that was the antidote for Naomi's seeming *abaissement du niveau mental*.

By the time he finished, she was wraith-like. En-ki had recovered consciousness, and had crawled back into the fading fistula and vanished.

Presently the dream Naomi dissolved.

Ranch willed his own dream to fade. It had become a dream within a dream. Grayness gave way to darkness, a darkness interrupted by four evenly spaced vertical rectangles of rosy light. Ranch's serpentine body reacquired limbs, became his own again. The obsidian block transmuted to a high-backed chair. Shelves lined with books gradually replaced the wavering walls of the crypt, and a paneled ceiling inset with unlighted fluorescents subtly supplanted the stalactities. Finally the rectangles stood revealed for what they were: library windows looking forth upon the dawn of a new day.

RANCH GOT UP from the high-backed chair and walked around the room. The dawnlight grew brighter, and he was able to make out some of the titles of the scholarly volumes lining the shelves. He saw Naomi's desk with the limestone En-ki figurine standing on it a short distance from its blue blotter. Choosing a

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book at random, he returned to the high-backed chair and faced it away from the door. Then he sat back down and began to read.

In a little while, Naomi would enter the room—a Naomi he had never officially seen before (except in a dream) and who had never before (except as the serpent and as a projection in her mind) seen him. Uppermost in her thoughts would be the dream from which she had awakened, terrified, at dawn; but she would not know that for herself and Ranch, and for the lion-man she had seen in the dream, a time-reversal had taken place, and that for each a new pattern would supplant the "old." Only Ranch, its author, would know, and would also know that the Cuiranin-induced journey which he had begun after-hours in the same room and from which he had so recently returned, had ended almost twelve months before it began.

SHE ARRIVED at 8:30 by the Department of Sumerology clock. He heard her footsteps when she came in the door and seated herself behind her desk.

He waited till she briefly left the room and returned; then he stood up and walked around the high-backed chair and over to the desk, behind which she had reseated herself. She looked up, startled. "Oh. I didn't see you come in."

She paused, staring up at him. She was neatly dressed in a conservative gray skirt-suit and her yellow hair was done into a meticulous bun at the back of her neck; but there were blue shadows under her eyes and her face was pale.

She lowered her gaze and straightened the blue blotter with trembling fingers. She looked up at him again. "Have—haven't we met somewhere before?"

"I don't think so," Ranch said. Then, "I wonder if you might find me a book called *Fara*? It was written by an E. Heinrich and a W. Andrae way back in 1931."

"I'm sure we have it," Naomi said, and got up and walked over to the files.

He watched her standing there, her girlish profile framed in one of the rectangular windows. Her anamnesis had told him very little of the cause behind her rejection of the world, and it might be difficult to uncover. But truly, she would not be difficult to love.

Presently she went over to one of the shelves, took down a book and brought it back to the desk. "Do you have a card?"

"No. I'll read it here."

Their hands touched when she handed it to him, and color crept into her cheeks, diminishing their pallor. "I have the day off," she said suddenly. "I didn't feel well this morning and called in for someone to replace me. But I thought I would come down to open up." Abruptly she gasped, and the color that had come into

(cont. on page 57)

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C. L. GRANT

TO BE A WITCH, IN THREE-QUARTER TIME

C.L. Grant made his debut in this magazine with "But The Other Old Man Stopped Playing" (April, 1973), a haunting evocation of post-Armageddon Greece. Now he turns his hand to a future time when humanity lives in terrarium-like environments and one woman seeks the reality of the past . . . or is it reality . . . ?

ILLUSTRATED by JEFF JONES

AWAY, away, and travel with me!

The music, soft, was horns and woodwinds, twin pianos and a harp.

The orchestra, large, was white jackets and black bowties, hair slicked close to the skull and gleaming in the spotlights that swooped. Clarinets, black to silver, stood twelve bars and faded; trombones, mirrored gold, stood twelve bars and faded. The leader carried a silver cornet he touched to his lips when he wasn't smiling.

The ballroom was immense, hot and crowded. The dancers, young and lovers, were jammed together and uncaring as the men perspired and the women rested damp cheeks against once-pressed lapels. They shuffled, and none broke the rhythm of the music by moving toward the long wall of French doors that were opened to a concrete terrace. There was a lake outside, surrounded by full-leaved trees and grass damp with midnight dew. There was a breeze outside, but no one cared.

The song was "Moonglow" in three-quarter time.

A woman leaned heavily against the grey marble railing on the terrace perimeter. Her back was to the lake. She watched the people, heard the shuffling beneath the music and waited for the man to step outside. She waited until the music stopped, waited until the music began again, then groaned and slumped to the ground. There were tears in her eyes as she fought, then lost the will to hold, and the ballroom shrank, shimmered and faded . . .

. . . to a ten-by-ten room unexcitingly white. Using a tiny square table in the center of the room for support, she slowly pulled herself to her feet and leaned wearily on

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her palms until the nausea and tears passed. A door slid open, shut, and a voice, low and respectful, asked how she felt.

"Fine," she said, angrily, exhausted. "Just fine. Get me something to drink, will you please?"

Footsteps passed her, a button clicked and when she opened her eyes, she was looking into a mirror. "Hello, you," she muttered. "Your eyes are red." And louder, "Dorsi, my eyes are red."

"Well, what did you expect, Ellen? You were probably crying like a kid with a fist in its throat." There were other noises in the kitchen alcove, but Ellen ignored them; they could have been laughter.

"So close," she said.

"Sure." Flatly.

Ellen shook her head, pulled a chair toward her and slumped into it, deliberately tracing patterns on her arms to avoid looking at the mirror again. The reflection disturbed her. She was beginning to look fifty instead of twenty-nine; her auburn hair was dulling, her face white instead of pale. And lines of strain were threatening to erupt from the corners of her eyes and mouth. She thought herself a mess and was too tired to worry about it just then.

Dorsi came long-legged, heavy-hipped from the kitchen and sat opposite her. "You're going to quit now? Surely you've had enough."

Ellen looked up, accepted the offered glass of amber and looked

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away, too quickly. Dorsi, even with concern drawing her face in upon itself, was much more vibrant, far more attractive. And she was eight years older.

"I almost had him this time. Closer now than ever before. If only I had the strength!"

"You're crazy, Ellen."

There was a silence.

"I said, you're crazy, Ellen. This thing of yours is steering you right to the edge. I'm no Minder, El, but I do know you've got to drop it now. If you don't, you're crazy."

"And what does that make you," Ellen snapped, "one of the emminently sane?"

Dorsi stood, her chair scraping the bare, tiled floor. "No. I'm your Self, Ellen, and I'm trying to help you. I should call in somebody—Monitor, maybe—but I don't want to lose you. I want to help you, but you persist in carrying on with this insanity."

"Oh . . . damn, Dorsi, sit down, sit sit sit. I'm sorry, really I am. It's just that I know it works. I know it. It has to."

Dorsi wavered, then sat and reached across the table to take Ellen's hands. She caressed them nervously until Ellen, gently, pulled them away and chaffed her cheeks and tugged at her hair. "Listen, El," Dorsi said, "I've never understood this . . . this compulsion of yours, but I do know one thing: there is no such thing as a magic. Not only are you being unreasonable, and literally so, but you're also being downright childish. You're a grown woman, Ellen. Don't you think it's time you stopped this foolish nonsense before we both get hurt?"

"It isn't nonsense."

"Oh, Ellen, really!"

"But I was there, Dorsi, I was actually there!"

Dorsi leaned back and scratched her head, then pushed at her short-cropped brown hair. "You were right here. I saw you."

"I came back before you returned. I tell you I was really there."

"There's just no sense in arguing with you, Ellen. We've been over this a hundred times. I've never seen you travel. I've never seen you disappear to this place of yours. No one has."

"You don't believe me."

"Oh, come on, now, Ellen, please. If you're not careful, you're going to end up like those flyers. You're going to be dead, Ellen, and I will not permit that!"

"You don't care about me, do you?"

"Ellen—"

"And you don't believe me."

There was a chime, insistent, doubled, trebled. Ellen started, slopping liquid from her glass. The chiming continued and she hurried to the far wall to thumb the comunit, then stood to one side when a red and gold star pattern flashed on the screen, brightly.

"Monitor," Dorsi said, a trace

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of nervousness in her voice. "Red and gold. That's you, El."

Ellen nodded mutely but didn't move.

"You'd better get moving. The old bitch must be in one of her moods."

Still Ellen didn't speak. As if in sleep, she acknowledged the summons, brushed at her work-shift and took down the ropelike girdle from its place near the door. As she tied it about her waist, she stared at Dorsi, reproachfully.

"I didn't say a thing, Ellen. You know that."

Ellen left without speaking. A moment later she returned, smiling self-consciously. "I'll not be home for dinner, Dorsi. I've got work to do."

"But the girls are coming over," Dorsi complained. "What's so important you can't have fun once in a while?"

"Tell them I'm sorry, but I have a reconstruction to do for the Theater."

Dorsi grinned. "That's about all you Storians do, isn't it?"

Ellen grinned back. "Vital stuff, Self. Tell them I'm sorry, okay?"

"I'll do that."

Ellen winked. "Thanks, dear. Don't wait up. I may be late."

"So what else is new?"

Ellen shook her head slowly. "Nothing. That's the hell of it."

THE ILLUSION of open spaces, sky, clouds, and the passing of weather was successful for most, but when Ellen peered closely she could see the seams of the Sector's roof and the projected puffs that passed for clouds. Each of the Sector's Levels was open on one side, open to the drop that permitted her to look down to the gardens several storeys below. She paused for a moment on her way to the lift to scan the pale green and relieve her eyes of the unremitting white of her rooms. People passed in the garb of their professions, ignoring her if they knew her not, acknowledging her with a nod and a tight smile if they'd seen her before; her social position required nothing more. But she saw nothing but the Park and the tops of the heads of the people who crossed it, rested in it, worked there to keep it alive. She lay a hand against the railing, bending over as if to telescope the view and pinpoint the man she needed to see. She would have stayed there longer but a muffled commotion distracted her. Glancing to her left, she spotted the large black Squad van pulling out of a corridor intersection. Lately, that had meant only one thing: a flyer. She took a few hesitant steps toward the growing crowd, and stopped. Voices raised, and there was a struggle before the van disappeared as swiftly as it had come. Ellen waited, scanning the people until a man passed her, his read and gold tunic slightly rumpled. She didn't recognize him but reached out to delay him.

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"Excuse me, Historian," she said, her voice deferential in spite of herself.

The man, frowning and apparently frightened, stared at her puzzled until the recognition of her coded shift penetrated. Immediately he relaxed, Ellen smiled.

"What is it, Historian?" he said.

"What happened?"

"Oh." He made no attempt to hide his disgust. "Another flyer. He was hitched over the rail proclaiming stuff about nature and freedom and something called elbow room; the usual insane line. He was lucky we got to him in time. I was the one who held him for the Squad. Monitor'll be pleased, I think."

Ellen only smiled her praise and dropped her hand. The man waited, then nodded and hurried on. Almost immediately Ellen heard a hushed, commanding voice paging her, and she moved on.

At the lift she presented her pass to the attendent, who clocked her in and removed the barrier. The tube caught her, buoyed and carried her upward a dozen or more Levels. When she reached her assigned stop, she brushed by the waiting line, turned left, ignoring the railing and the light shimmering blindly beyond. The doors here were color-coded, ornamented, gilded. She nearly ran now, her palms moist, her forehead aching. When she reached the Monitor's office, she hesitated, breathed deeply and stepped into the reception room. A secretary barricaded behind a massive montage of screens and microphones beckoned to her. Ellen suddenly felt short, fat and incredibly lonely.

"Ellen Cinq?"

She nodded dumbly, presenting her badge and her thumb. The secretary tsked to herself. "Go ahead, Ellen. She's waiting."

"What . . . what mood?"

The girl shrugged. "Who knows? What mood is she ever in?"

Ellen tried a smile, failed and headed slowly toward the indicated door. Wood it was, and scrolled. She had long ago stopped dreaming about such a door for her own. She had consigned herself to being merely competent and had no head for politics. Before she could knock, the door slid open and she entered quickly, deferentially lowering her eyes until she was ten paces inside and the door closed behind her.

The Monitor sat behind a transparent desk uncluttered, unadorned. She was amazingly old, heavy-set and creased like a much-used map. She waved a ringless hand toward a straight-backed chair in the center of the room and Ellen scurried to it, waited for a signal and sat, her hands tight in her lap.

The Monitor glared at her. The Monitor always glared, even when administering praise. Ellen had

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never learned to read her eyes, and had thus never learned not to fear her.

"Ellen Cinq. Twenty-nine. Historian. Unmothered. Uncontracted. Self: Dorsi Sept. Good social index; fair professional index. Project current: historical reconstruction late nineteenth early twentieth centuries. Secondary use: specialized schooling; primary use: Sector Theater."

In the pause, Ellen nodded. The Monitor, whose lips scarsely moved, as if she were a computer's dummy, nodded. "Your prematuration scanning reveals a scale that could have placed you in a science. Why did you choose Historian?"

"You've never asked me that before, Monitor."

"Consider it done."

"A sense of continuity, Monitor."

"From the beginning?"

Ellen thought, puzzled and somewhat intrigued by her own answers. "No, I guess not. Curiosity, I suppose. The rest came later, after I'd read. I've come to consider it important."

Monitor may have smiled. "Nonsense. Your concept is passe; the past is just a word. Continuity is a semantic word labeling game for clinging to what is dead, like the Outside. Just as magic is a poor excuse for wishing for something you cannot have, now or later, before or after."

Ellen stiffened, but she was not surprised Monitor suspected her. The city or its functionaries needed no spying devises when there were plenty of people willing to talk in hopes of new colors. All Monitor needed was the right questions. "I deal with correlation of facts, Monitor, to trace progress, prevent mistakes."

"Nonsense again. Facts are facts, nothing more, historical interpreatation unnecessary. Abstractions are abstractions, and a waste of time for the most part. Do you know what purpose Historians have?"

"To help us understand ourselves, our time, our city," Ellen said automatically, quoting from her first text.

"None. We have them because the city's fathers wrote them into the scholastic charter. Of the four hundred fifteen Sectors of our city, only twenty-three have active Historians. Think about it."

Ellen said nothing. The Monitor's real or assumed snobbery in favor of the Sciences was notorious; yet it wasn't hers alone. At periodic conventions with other Sectors, she'd learned it pervaded the city, all the cities that dotted the globe. The past was slowly absorbing a patina of poison. The Minders considered it significant that most of the flyers were Historians.

"You seem to excavate the bones of man's continuous pride?"

"Something like that."

"Honesty?"

"When it shows."

"Love?"

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Ellen suddenly became wary. Tired though she was, she'd had too many interviews with the guardian of her Sector to believe all her questions were entirely innocent or random. Finally she answered, "Yes, and sometimes love. When it counts."

"Useless, woman. You are becoming falsely, dangerously motivated."

Ellen tried a smiling diversion. "You must be tired today. You sound like a machine, Monitor."

"Oh, but I am. A biological machine."

"But emotions, Monitor. They make history."

"And for that reason they are controlled, Cinq, controlled. It's safer that way. We would go mad in here otherwise."

"Is this a warning?"

"A hint, Ellen Cinq, just a little hint. Do your job. More, and you're not helping us. Less, and you're in trouble."

"I'm trying."

"Try harder. It is now 2047, free time for those who can afford to squander it. Suggestion rendered: visit a laboratory. Try Immunology. They'll be on a head today."

Ellen stood, nodded a bow and retreated into the outer office. The secretary grinned at her; Ellen grinned back, realizing suddenly how relieved she was. Monitor could have demanded a reckoning and saddled her with a restriction on her magicking, penalized her spare time and ordered the demonstration instead of suggesting it. Why she did not, Ellen didn't want to know; skirting her mind was the possibility Monitor was only looking for the evidence needed to send her away. It made her quest all the more urgent. She knew that Monitor would eventually learn how she intentionally disregarded the gesture of redemption, but by then she hoped it wouldn't make any difference.

THE TUBE dropped her to the ground Level, and the green glow scattered by the plants were as fresh air and a cool shower. She hurried onto the grass after clocking in and bounced to feel the give no floor could imitate. Then she hastened along the central walkway, turned left at the first intersection and slowed. The Park was less crowded today than when she had last been here. The omnipresent loudspeakers whispered the transplant bulletins as if a war had been won. Ellen visualized a disembodied head, a beheaded torso, and shuddered. When she looked up through the foliage, the roof's seams were almost invisible.

Walking she willed herself to forget the Sector, the city and the walls that threatened her. She had never been to the condemned exterior, not once looked through a window that she could recall, yet her imagination replaced the wondering with daydreams, and the city closed in as surely as if she had. She knew that was

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wrong, but she'd come to believe more things even more wrong. Dorsi had more than once tried cajoling her into a stay at their Level's rehab clinic, but Ellen had refused, especially when her Self had not-so-subtly hinted it would rid her of her powers as well. Gently she grasped a blade of grass and let it slide between her fingers, then whiffed the wondrous smell clinging to her skin. Dorsi. At thirty-seven she had had her husband and her children, her husband dying experimenting in pathology. She had immediately requested and was granted a transfer from pediatrics to geriatrics and moved in with Ellen when Ellen's first Self had been given a man and had left. Dorsi, cheated of one man, ambiguously denied right to another, found Ellen instead, and Ellen didn't mind. By that time she'd decided if she couldn't have her choice she'd rather be Sappho than courtesan. Monitor was right in that respect; history could be dangerous.

As she rounded a corner by a miniature fountain sprinkling rainbow water, she spotted the oblong yellow cart and the man kneeling beside it. The walkway was otherwise deserted; the pinch-faced, rodentlike children would not be out for an hour yet. She hesitated. Talk or try: she thought of Monitor's unsmiling hints and Dorsi's martyred exasperation. Try. With him so close there might not be need for another. Carefully she stepped back until she was positive she could enter the shrubbery's cover without startling him. Then she knelt on the ground and clasped her hands to her breasts until, pressing, the pain starred her vision.

Away, away and travel with me!

Over and over and over again. A refrain, a litany, a remembrance faulty, but true to the sense of Time she felt: a link to a dimension of power over power, Time over matter, mind over all.

Away, away and travel with me!

There had been a Sector entertainment, massive to combat the sudden, terrifyingly tempting flux of flyers, which had awakened her to search out studies—easily obtainable, not so easily understood—of the extraordinary potential of the theoretical mind. The citizenry, uncomfortably calmed, was amused, bemused and left for their rooms laughing, speculating and laughing again. If this were true, then Dorsi's love be damned, and be damned to the system that had left her untouched, yet touched again with the need to be out . . .

. . . where the music, still playing, was soft on the heavy summer air that closed and opened around her. She still lay on the stone floor of the terrace until she saw where she was and hurried to her feet, straightening, preening until her hair settled lightly upon

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her shoulders. Vast stone vases dotted the railing, the balustrade that led down the winding stairs to the lawn creeping to the lake; and in the vases, torches that forged dark into shadow and burned patterns on her skin. She leaned over, looked down and was momentarily dizzy. She was still alone.

The music paused, always "Moonglow", then drifted again and she turned to see a shadow in the doorway opposite her. Behind the shadow, the dancers unaware. Into the light and he wore a white dinner jacket and black with satin stripes trousers. His shoes were quiet on the stone as he approached her, and as his face came into the torchlight he stumbled and she cried out to share his pain, then decried the pain she felt herself as terrace ballroom balustrade faded. . . .

. . . to the park where she lay face down on the grass, panting and weeping silently. A hand touched her shoulder. She whirled around and looked into the man's concerned eyes.

"Hey, Ellen," he said. "You all right? I heard you cry out. Did you trip?"

She wiped her face with the backs of her hands and accepted his hand in guiding her to her feet. Then he stood back, awkwardly silent while she tugged and pulled to neaten herself. "Yes, I did," she said, too embarrassed to stay, too frightened to run. "I was daydreaming and tripped over my own two feet." She forced a laugh and he relaxed.

"Say," he said, "come on over here and keep me company. You are on your own time, aren't you?"

"Well, sure, Mitch. Do you think I'm a rebel or something?"

"You never can tell anymore," he said with arch seriousness. "Some of the prettiest girls I know are fanatics. You just cannot tell."

She laughed and followed him to where he had been working. There were plants in the cart, their colors vying for brightest. Carefully, as if they were newborn, he picked them out one by one to place in ordered rows by the walk/bench section. In a pile at his feet lay a dozen or more dead ones, their blossoms gone drab.

"I, uh, don't know those," she ventured, hoping she wouldn't sound stupid.

"No one does yet," he said without pausing. "These are new, fresh from the fields so to speak. We've been trying to make them self-supporting but the air's not right in here. Every time the Outside sneaks through a crack somewhere they've had it, usually gone within a year. That is, unless some nut digs them up or a flyer lands on them."

"You don't say," she muttered, not understanding a word, not caring.

He nodded, still not looking up

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at her. "I know a guy who's trying to train some bees to restrict themselves to the park so's they won't bother us, but either they die before they're of any use, or they're too vicious and have to be destroyed. Shame, because I'd hate to see this Park go. We get a fair amount of experimenting done here, you know. Oh well. You know they're lowering the ceiling another four Levels during the next quarter."

"I heard."

"They keep this up, in another three years this place'll be gone. I understand most Sectors don't have Parks anymore. Too much space, too much time. I'm not even going to be here after next week. Do you know," he said, reaching up to dump the dead flowers into the now-emptied cart, "that some of these trees were around when I was a boy? I remember the Nurses taking us out for touch sessions. I remember one girl who cried when she had to touch bark. You ever notice how the little kids could care less anymore about this place? I mean, it's as if they'd rather be elsewhere, just like everyone else except the few like you." He shook his head and rambled on about newer generations and botanical experimentation, but Ellen heard nothing, had not been listening since the mention of his leaving. She had stepped back, choking, and demanded of herself that she run away. Instead, she watched intently the slope of his bent back, the stretching of the dark, nearly midnight green of the tunic across his shoulders, the nervous way his hands held the dirt, the plants. And she was dismayed at that nervousness, the darting quick movements that were indicative of the flyer symptom. Soon, she thought, he would become sullen, irritable and then, if he hadn't been caught by a Minder, either homicidal or suicidal.

"Silly," he was saying as he sat back on his haunches and reached out his hands to stretch them. "But I suppose some people felt that way when they shut out the real sky, too. You think so?" He glanced back at her over his shoulder so quickly she could only nod. "You must have seen a lot of that, being a Storian and all," he said. She shook her head, saying, "No, no, I don't come up that far."

"Oh," he said, frowning just enough to sadden her. "Well, I still suppose that's the way it was." He stood, then, and reached to the cart's side, toggling and lifting the vehicle to its air cushion. "You're nice to talk to, you know that?" he said, standing with the hovering cart between them. "You're the first Storian I've really met. We don't usually see the lower professions. I always thought you people were stuffy. And dreamers. You know what I mean: always wanting to go back or . . . . well, you know what I mean." He shrugged,

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grinning. "Oh, well, that's the way of it, I guess. Listen, if you ever get, uh, a pass to the next Level entertainment, let me know, okay? I'm here most of the time." Then he laughed. "But you know that already, don't you? But let me know. Maybe we can get together for a bit afterward. Maybe we can . . ." and he grinned and winked mock-leeringly.

Ellen didn't know what to say. *Laison*. All she could do was smile inanely. *Laison*. She nodded and hurried away. He wouldn't be like that if he ever knew how she planned to save him from the fate of a too-large portion of the Sector population; he wouldn't be like that ever again. She pushed past the first small crowd of children fluttering in their white togas, looking bored and preferring to stare at her instead of the plants. Quickly into the tube, quickly to her work Level. She ignored the amazed stares of the nightshift as she headed directly to her cubicle without checking in. And when the sound curtain settled behind her, blocking sight and noise, she allowed herself one not-so-silent scream before reaching for the headgear that would plunge her out and away and back. She didn't even stop to program a year.

Away, away and travel with me!

SHE AWOKE, trembling.

The room was a fear-stifling yellow so gentle she had to look twice to see if it was really there. There was a pillow beneath her damp hair, sheets drawn tightly across her chest and legs. And beneath the sheets, restraining belts. She turned her head, still afraid to speak. She was alone; it was quiet. She remembered little of the spell she'd tried to work, remembered nothing of the trip she'd tried to take. Blankly she stared at the wall opposite and thought of flowers unknown until she fell asleep, dreamless.

Again, awake. There was a lump in her left hand and she grasped it tightly, her eyes staying closed as she sifted and realized the belts were gone, the sheets soft and loose. The lump moved, became a hand that itself held her. "Mitch," she said.

"Who?"

She opened her eyes. Dorsi sat on a stool beside the bed, smiling worriedly through a puzzled frown. Her eyes were unusually made up, an inept attempt to cover the red rims and tracks of black circles. She traced a vein in Ellen's arm until Ellen could not help but grin, and the frown vanished. "Hi," she said, near to whispering though Ellen noticed she was still the only patient in the room.

"Hi."

"I was worried about you."

Ellen nodded.

"When you didn't come home at all, I called a tracer and he said you'd gone to work. When you

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didn't come in for firstmeal, I went to the studyhall. There was no record of your checking in, and no one knew you were there. They had to force open the curtain. The headset was on its shelf and you were lying on the floor. I ... . I thought you were dead."

"I feel so weak, Dorsi."

Her Self nodded sympathetically. "You've been out for nearly two days. I don't know why. Something about trauma, the Minder said. Do you know what that means?"

Ellen shook her head.

"You were working that thing again, weren't you?"

Ellen started to nod, then checked herself, suddenly frightened. "I'm not sure, Dorsi. I hardly remember a thing." Her eyes widened then. "I'll bet . . . I'll bet it worked though! I'll bet it did and that's why I'm so sick and weak. I'll bet I was there! Oh Dorsi, Dorsi, how close can I get?"

She stopped, and Dorsi gently removed her hand to push nervously at her hair. Biting her lower lip, she seemed about to break out in the scold Ellen knew well enough; instead, she bridged her fingertips, then rubbed them against her temples. Abruptly she began crying but made no move to cover her face nor wipe the tears that smeared her eye make-up and sent traces of darkness down her drawn cheeks. Ellen tried to sit up to reach her, but her arms weren't strong enough and she fell back onto the pillow, dismayed and angered. Impatiently she waited until Dorsi looked up. The sight of her Self's weakness had given her strength and birthed a conviction.

"They told you I needed stabilization, didn't they? They told you I was going to become like a flyer if I didn't get it."

Dorsi's silence was all the answer she needed. A wash of anger shook her and her cheeks flushed, her eyes narrowed. "Then I am getting close."

"They haven't used drugs yet because you're so weak. Monitor's ordered your rest."

"Of course, and why not? She's afraid, just like the rest of them. If I'm successful and they don't shut me up, think of all the others who'll try to get out of this place."

"But to where, Ellen? The Outside is poison, and you know that as well as anybody."

"But *then* wasn't."

Dorsi stiffened, her lips thinning as her face tautened, added shadows as she stood. "There is no then, little girl, except in your muddled head and those false tapes of yours. This is now, and that's all there'll ever be." She turned away, turned back, her fists clenched. "And what's so bad about now? Tell me, Ellen, what's so bad about living longer, staying healthier and working better? What is so damned wrong that you're risking your life?"

Ellen watched remotely as Dorsi raged. She'd been through

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this before, often enough to predict the storming out of the room, and the contrite return. The pleading replacing the raging, the supplication, the move to physical love to smooth the unsmoothable. Only now Dorsi could not touch her, and the world changed. Ellen remained immobile, silent and staring.

Finally, "I can transport myself," she said calmly. "With a spell and a will, and all I need is the strength to make it stick, to hold me in the stream until I can become part of it. I can do it, Dorsi, and no mummy with a textile wig is going to stop me. Not now, and not ever."

Dorsi swallowed another sob and reached for Ellen's hand. She pulled it away sharply.

"I'm tired."

"Ellen, please."

"Go away, Dorsi."

"I won't lose you, Ellen Cinq," she said with alarming firmness. "I've already lost one. I'll not lose another. I'm going to tell the Minder and Monitor everything. You'll not turn flyer and get away from me."

"I'm sorry for you."

"So am I."

Ellen watched as she left, huffing past a Nurse that rolled quickly in, clamped on and gave her an injection she didn't want. As the drug pulled her into clouds, she wondered why she hadn't said the words that would have smoothed over everything between them. Only a few words was all it would have taken; lies that would have been, not soothing nevertheless. Her vision blurred and she closed her eyes. It had started because she desired something caste denied her; she had claimed to herself it was in the cause of love. Now she recognized the crystallization of another, deeper and more frightening reason: the Level, the Sector, the continent City—unnaturally enclosed, artificially maintained and perpetuated in the belief that man need not be limited as long as there was space into which to squeeze him. A vast coven of scientific witches casting test tube, biogenic spells as incomprehensible as her own, screaming progress and progression from their sterile altars without informing what the words meant. Mortar instead of cauldron.

And so, the flyers.

"I would leave this place," she muttered in half-sleep, and the Nurse hovered closer, sampling tissue blood saliva and pricking her again to send her into sleep without memory.

Awaking. Time became meaningless; there was nothing to do but wait. Patience. Nourishment. During that time, Dorsi never came to hold her.

IT MAY have been a week, Ellen didn't know, nor did she really care. Often she thought of that thwarted flyer, kinsman, and for a while she wanted desper-

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ately to find and talk with him, sit in a room without Monitor barging in and talk with him, listen and find out what was really wrong with her and how to save . . . how to save. . . . Faces came, not people, alone and in twos and threes and spoke, questioned and left without revealing what they knew. It frustrated her because she could see they were worried, and she wasn't vain enough to believe that one Historian was causing all that consternation. Only once did she slip and mention her magic, but the men who were listening only nodded as if her ability were too commonplace to be noteworthy, or too unique to be credible. Faces. And voices. Always why, and speaking more of the City than of her. There was an afternoon when five of them, in their professional tunics of blues and greens and a solitary Minder black, made her laugh because she suddenly felt important, the guardian of the City, the saviour of the society. She was treated with deference, and that puzzled her until she decided they were merely being condescending.

And still they came, wearing at her until she cried. Still coming until she fought them, screaming once to let her alone and let her go. *You're not completely well yet,* they said, and she answered, *That's not what I meant.*

Away, away . . .

Once she was called a symptom and she felt rather proud, but the constant talking, the drugs, the whirling kaleidescopic machines numbed her, flattened her and puffed her out again. Doubts came in fear, rushing; fear led to distraction, guided; and on an afternoon when nobody came, no one at all, she began wondering why she had ever wanted to leave to the Sector and the people who cared for her. She answered herself as she always did, but now she needed comfirmation, bolstering and a reason to keep fighting. She asked the Nurse to call for Dorsi and immediately the door opened and her Self rushed in, crying. And Ellen, crying, held the woman to her breasts and rocked the two of them into silence.

"I wanted to come," Dorsi said, her voice muffled as her face lay against the sheet, the softness that was Ellen. "I wanted to, El, but they said it wasn't time. I've been here every day and Monitor finally had me placed on leave, and I've been here all the time, El, except to sleep." She looked up into Ellen's passive eyes; her own seemed to squint, barely, and, "There was a man, Ellen. His name was Mitch Deux. He wanted to see you."

"Who?"

Dorsi's eyes brightened, filled and opened to tears once again. The Nurse, as if on signal, bustled in, clicking. A man followed, another and they all beamed at her until she frowned. "Hello," she said. "Do I know you?" The

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men began talking, both at once, then laughed at their eagerness to speak until one, older, black, the Minder, bowed to the other. He seemed content to watch.

"All this time, Ellen Cinq, and you don't know us?" His voice was softer, gentler than the yellow walls. Ellen's hand stroked Dorsi's hair idly, and she shook her head. "Well, we're the ones who have made you well," he said proudly, with just a hint of modesty he obviously did not feel. "And you are well, aren't you?"

"Do you wish to leave the Sector, the City?" the Minder asked.

Ellen shook her head.

"How is your magic?"

Ellen shrugged.

"Anxious to get back to work? The Theater misses you. And School does, too."

And there it was. Ellen nodded, smiling broadly. "I'll go back as soon as I can."

The two men seemed ready to applaud; instead they patted her hand, nodded to Dorsi and left, whispering. Dorsi disentangled herself from Ellen's grip and stood, hand to hair and Ellen had to smile at the familiar, though more nervous gesture. They looked carefully at each other until Dorsi said, "You'll be chosen a man soon." Ellen closed her eyes. "I wonder who he'll be."

"Yes," Ellen said softly. "I wonder. As nice . . . as nice as our ghost of yours, I hope."

Dorsi laughed and touched her cheek lightly. "Better, I hope."

"I think I'd rather have you."

Dorsi only grinned and shrugged. "Tomorrow you'll be coming home, and work the next day probably. I'll be waiting for you. The girls want to have a party for you. Do you think you can manage it?"

"I'm strong now," Ellen said as quietly as before. "They treat you really well in here, Dorsi. I'm fine. In fact, I'm stronger than I've ever been, now. Much stronger. Don't you worry about a thing."

Abruptly, Dorsi waved and backed out of the room. "Great," she said. "See you."

"Yes," Ellen said. "Fine."

She smiled, and this time her eyes reflected the smile.

It had come when her Self had mentioned Mitch. Ellen knew it had to be deliberate, a test, a teasing to check on her progress to be sure she was ready. And she was. She knew now why the man had flown and shivered with pleasant fear when she realized that she, too, would also fly when she left this room to return to a room. It came to her somewhere along the line that someone should have noticed that her job was more real than her living, and the dead more alive. To the events she reconstructed she was the future. And she sensed here they might envy her, and she laughed at their shortsightedness, pitied their stupidity. Someone along the line someone was taking people for granted.

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The lights dimmed and were gone.

One avenue, one way or another, she told herself, she would never see the seams in the sky again.

The phrase came easily to her tongue: *away, away and fly with me.*

The scene came easily to her eyes: always the music, always the dancers, and always always the terrace in the soft summer evening. She felt strong as her hand gripped the stone tightly; it was cold and rough and a spur pricked her palm. Never be back, and she whirled to feel her gown twirl around her legs, whispering silk. A deep breath. Deeper. She closed her eyes, opened, and the ballroom was still there. *Moonglow. Waltzing.* She moitened her lips, straightened her hair and leaned back against the *balustrade, humming the music, waiting for the man to step out of the shadows and ask her to dance.*

—C.L. GRANT

Perchance To Dream (cont. from page 41)

her cheeks deepened to rose-red. "Why, I don't know what came over me!" she said. "Why in the world should I have told you that?"

"It doesn't matter," Ranch said. "What matters is that you did. How soon will your replacement be here?"

"Any minute now."

"I'll be glad to drive you home," Ranch said. "I have my car outside." He frowned. "That is, I *think* I do."

"I'll get my hat and coat."

IN THE *Abzu,* En-ki—exhausted after his aborted attempt to acquire a mate—had fallen fast asleep. He had begun to dream the moment he closed his eyes. It was a dream he had dreamed many times before. In it, he was made of stone and was standing upon a smooth plateau near a blue lake.

Often, giants invaded the dream. There were two of them present now, standing near the plateau and towering high above it. He listened to the booming of their voices, but was unable to make out their words. One of them was a female giant, the other a male. The male giant frightened En-ki. There was something about him that made En-ki think of a great snake.

Presently the two giants were joined by a third. En-ki was glad when the first two departed, walking hand in hand.

He hoped they would never come back.

—ROBERT F. YOUNG

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JUANITA COULSON

Juanita Coulson introduced us to an alien world and clashing magicks in her "Wizard of Death" (February, 1973). Now she takes us back to that world for a tale set upon a sea, in which a pirate meets and bests his mate and she finds her fate as up from the deeps comes–

THE DRAGON OF TOR-NALI

ILLUSTRATED by MIKE KALUTA

NO MORE THAN a heartbeat, and the ship was gone, sliding from beneath him, torn asunder by the minions of the Sea-God. Another instant, and the last fragments of planking disintegrated in Danaer's hands. He was plunged into a world of wet, bone-chilling cold and utter blackness.

He thrashed about wildly, and a terrible pain lanced through his mouth and nose, burning behind his eyes. Water! It was the agonizing stab of water in his nostrils, searing the inside of his head. How might anything so bitterly cold as this cursed Traecheun Sea strike such fiery torture into his skull?

To die thus! A Plains-Dweller, out of the tribe of Nyald, here sunk into the foul dark waters of Clarique, food for her fishes. And no Believer to cry his soul to the Gates of the Gods. It was an unbearable irony.

No!

Thoughts whirled in Danaer's brain, thoughts almost blotted out by pale flashes of red and yellow—flashes a part of his mind told him were warnings of death.

No! Not here! Not yet!

Lance in hand, driving toward an enemy. A good roan between one's knees. Yes! Grass and open ground and the wind—a wind without the bitter tang of salt spray—hard upon one's face. That was the way a warrior should die.

How long had been his journey, from the arid plains of Nyald, to service in Krantin's army, and now, in pursuit of an enemy more deadly than any brigand or slayer-behind-men's-backs, here on an alien Clarique ship. And into an alien Clarique sea, to drown.

A siren voice whispered—Submit. It is pointless. There is seed of your flesh to bear forward your name. A son lives to sing your name, the son safe, there homeward on the sealess expanse of the Vas-Tre plains. Submit. Your name will be sung to the

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Gates of the Gods.

No!

Faces loomed through the now brighter flashes of death muddling his thoughts, faces he cherished. Lira's luminous eyes, beckoning him: *Come, I am your woman. Come, take joy with me.* He reached for that joy and found only black, icy water.

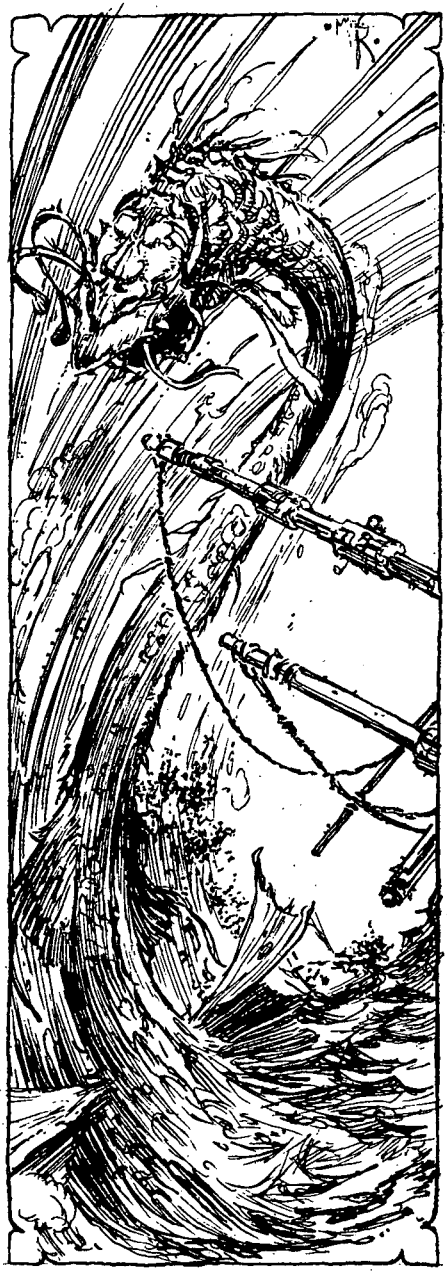
To die thus! He clung to those faces, though they were growing dim. Gordyan's friendly hard, laughing visage, his blood mingling with Danaer's. Lend me your strength, Gordyan, that I may defeat the sea. And the face of Shaartre, and the other men who fought at his side against that enemy from beyond the Great Sea. Their faces were fading from his vision. Desperately he fought back the warnings of death.

And then, all at once it seemed, there was blinding light on his face. He winced away from the brightness and heard a familiar voice ordering him, "Calmly, Scout. We are not dead yet. Here, sit up and spew out the sea."

When he could bear to open his eyes more than a slit Danaer knew it had been some while since he had fought the sea. The sky about him lowered with iron-grey, angry clouds, and yet there was light. And the roiling, tossing motion of a boat beneath him, and the stinking odor of the sea.

"Now, Danaer."

He obeyed the voice, the hard hand gripping his shoulder, and



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found no difficulty in vomiting until he thought his belly would burst. The welcome reality of this gave his mind an opportunity to grasp what lay about him.

Danaer lifted his head to gaze at Branra. He was very heartened at the sight of that square, swarthy face. The young officer's uniform was torn, his hair still dripping from the sea. But his wry smile gave Danaer a strange feeling that nothing—neither time, wreck of ship, nor their coming here, wherever that might be—had intervened. Branra was the beloved of the gods and they would not let him perish, though he might again and again sacrilegiously curse their names and profane their honors.

"Are . . . are we at the Gates, My Lord?"

"Dead?" Branra laughed, his eyes sparkling. "Not yet."

"Not yet indeed, my prizes."

As Danaer turned to see who spoke, Branra explained, his tone developing a bite, "You must meet our host—Nidil-Zaa."

The hair on the back of Danaer's neck rose. The sun's light tore through the clouds directly behind the tall figure looming over him, silhouetting a great muscular body, outlining the streaming hair with golden fire. Arms akimbo, the stranger seemed to hulk over his helpless prey. Danaer's heart chilled, Branra's words still rattling in his ears.

That name! Nidil–the Death-God.

How could Branra say they were not yet dead, when here stood . . .

"Nidil-Zaa," the stranger repeated. "Welcome aboard the Qlitos-Gaet. And did I truly hear this drowned-rat refer to you as 'My Lord'? What have we here then, my fine nobleman?"

Danaer struggled to his feet, grateful for Branra's hand under his arm. The officer carefully maneuvered so that they no longer faced the sun directly. Now partially side-lit, the ominous tall man lost some of his awesome mien. Yet, not all. That name still disturbed Danaer, dragging up from his childhood all the terrifying tales of the Death-God and his icy embrace. But this was a man—powerful, his bare chest and arms white with scars though his fair, almost handsome face seemed untouched by weapon. A filthy loincloth was his only garment, and he wore a belt heavy with short sword and dagger. Danaer's desire to pray to ward off evil died slowly within him. This was a man to be guarded against, but no god.

"Come, 'My Lord'." The voice was sharp, carrying, and not so deep as one imagined the Death-God's would be. "We have a question here worth your life." This Nidil-Zaa spoke Clarique, and yet many of his words were in a language familiar to Danaer, the patois of traders, those who also touched his homeland, Kran-

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tin. "Now that you've done worrying over your companion, you will answer this question. In payment. Your slave price for your buying from the arms of the Sea-God. Bought by *me*."

"The price was low," Branra said warily. Danaer recognized that sparring for time inflection in the young officer's voice.

"To drag you both from the sea? Be honest. You could not have borne this one up much longer. You were nearly spent when we hauled you aboard."

Danaer glanced at the Lord-Captain and said guiltily, "You should not have done so, My Lord."

"You were the only one I could reach in time." Branra sounded very bitter, vengeful. At the Sea-God? Danaer marveled at his frightening lack of piety, and not for the first time.

Suddenly a short sword was in the brown scarred hand of the man calling himself Nadil-Zaa, and the point was against Danaer's chest. Danaer admired the man's speed and inhaled deeply, tensing himself, his hand inching toward his belt. If a man must die, to do so in battle with a warrior such as this were worthy.

"Stay. You have no weapon," Branra warned, his eyes on their captor.

"No weapons, and you had so many between you! Especially our half-drowned friend here. And you, 'My Lord', wore a most elegant nobleman's sword, a beautiful—and I must say well-used—weapon. Now, a name for you—and your worth—or shall I skewer your sodden companion?" Nidil-Zaa flashed them a peculiar smile, half dazzling white teeth and half kala-root stained black fangs. "I must know what I have, so that I may bargain with it."

"You would sell the Lord-Captain?" Danaer exclaimed, anger warming him after the watery cold he now only dimly remembered.

"Booty from the sea. My right. Speak, 'Lord-Captain', or did you salvage this one only to lose him to my sword?"

"I am not afraid of your sword, bejit." And Danaer dropped away from the weapon, rolling, coming to his feet in a crouch, half a length away.

That evil black and white grin widened. "Very good! But I think you will find the sea witches have sucked your strength. No! I do not want them killed, Yat. Not yet."

Danaer found there were men all about him, and Branra. Their knives were ready. One among them stepped close to Danaer, prodded his side with a dagger tentatively. Danaer did not flinch, studying the man in fascination. Not Clarique. Instead of the fair hair and tall form one expected of sea bandits, this man was dark and stocky, much of Branra's height and color, as obviously born of the inland provinces as if Krantin had been branded upon

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his chest.

"And you, countryman, do you betray us?" Branra said softly, speaking in Krant to this dark pirate.

The man smirked, shook his head. Danaer sensed he was not answering Branra but reacting with grim amusement to their predicament. No pity there. No help. They were friendless.

Then Danaer realized with chagrin that Nidil-Zaa of the pale eyes and predator mouth had spoken truly—his legs indeed were shaking from the effort of avoiding that sword. The time spent fighting the water, ere these bandits had dragged Branra and him from the sea, had taken its toll.

"Yat?" It was the ship's death-named captain, speaking to the dark Krantin-Y holding a knife into Danaer's side. "What do you make of them?"

"You have a prize here, Nidil. That one is certainly noble, plainly from The Interior. By his manner, well born. And from what remains of his garb, high ranked in their military. I'll wager his name is honored in Krantin's Royal Army."

"Which battles for you against the eastern invaders, the dreaded Markuand," Branra said sharply.

"The Markuand do not touch us," Nidil boasted.

"They shall. Do not think you will escape their cold anger forever. We press hard upon them, and they must turn toward the sea—your sea. Clarique's Great Eastern Sea. And then they will dispute you for its rule. Until now they have been occupied in ravaging not the sea but the land."

"We ravage it ourselves," the ship's captain retorted, and the seamen chuckled in noisy agreement. "Still, we have no love for these strangers, these Markuand. No more than we have for Claerq, or Krant. We are cast out from them, and had they the skill, they would slay us all. But we have our brotherhood, the Net of the Water Riders. And you, high born, whoever you are, are legitimate spoil caught in that net. You can save yourself—for this battle you wage with the invader Markuand, if you wish. Tell me: what is your ransom worth?"

Danaer almost heard Branra's teeth gnash in frustration, saw the officer's fists clenching. It evoked many memories of earlier anger, earlier warring: Lord Branra on the walls of Deki, bloody sword in hand, slaying the hated invaders by the tens; and the crossing of the Vas-Tre Plains during an anguished retreat, Branra sustaining them all, turning a rout into a gathering of strength anew; the Hill of Yeniir; and Vidik; and Laril-Quil—a dozen battles since Danaer had first met the young officer. Branra's sword against the enemy Markuand. He was the Royal Commander's third arm, the soul of his men. Branra's temper was a blessed weapon

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against the white-clad invaders. It must not be wasted here on some filthy sea bandit's hulk.

All about them now the sunlight streamed, raising a stink from the wet planking. The Storm-God was gathering his black clouds on the northern horizon, behind Branra's head, framing his anger. Danaer's belly was unsettled by the slow tossing of that watery horizon, and he bid it lie still. He had known Branra long. He would dare to speak. "My Lord, tell him. Malol can pay his pirate toll and these thieves will be on their way. And you will lead the van once more, driving the Markuand from the shores of Tor-Nali—as it must be."

After a long moment, he saw Branra's shoulders sag every so slightly. "Ai. You have reason. Then, Nadil-Zaa of the Qlitos-Gaet, you must speak to the Royal Commander of the armies of Krantin. He leads the fleet. Perhaps he has reached Tor-Nali by now and besieges the enemy garrison there. Who may know how long we two spent in the water, after that shipwreck? Say to My Lord Malol that you have Branra. He will pay you, and well, I think," Branra finished with a bitter, proud smile.

The thought sprang upon Danaer, chilling him, that perhaps Malol, too, had been lost in that storm—in that furious unleashing of Gros-Donque's murderous imps of water, wind, and lightning. When the tempest had rushed upon them, there had been no time for sighting other vessels in that awful moment when their transport had been dismasted and sunk.

Was the entire fleet ruined? Drowned in the black evil waters of the Traecheun Sea? Lira? His own witch-woman, far-seeing living weapon in the hands of the Royal Commander—had she died, that part of his soul? Danaer's hand crept to the talisman at his breast, his gift from that little woman's hand. The amulet glowed in his fingers, warm with magic. Then Lira's wizard web still touched it, still touched him. His woman lived.

But what of Gordyan, blood-friend. Did he live?

And the others, those army warriors who had fought beside him, and those of the Tribes aboard that Dekan fleet? Had Gordt te Raa and the tribes been lost, Danaer's own people drowned a Ten-Days' ride east from their beloved Vas-Tre Plains?

"This one is a Destre," the man called Yat announced, wonder in his voice. "With Branra? With Braraediir of the Bloody Sword? It is not to be believed! Even ere I abandoned Krantin's soil forever, the minstrels sang of Branra, Scourge of the Destre Tribes. And he risked death to save you, warrior?"

Danaer smiled, remembering. Indeed, two winters earlier he

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would have echoed the sea bandit's wonder. War made strange companions, bred admiration and loyalty where hatred had blossomed before. In pursuit of the hated invader, he and Branra had become one.

The officer saved Danaer the need to explain. "He is a scout, with the Royal army. And he is *also* of value to the commander. Malol will pay you for his release as well as. . . ."

"Nidil! Sail!"

That death-named captain and most of the seamen responded at once to the hail from the man aloft. But Yat continued to press his knife against Danaer's ribs while the others followed the lookout's pointing arm toward the north. Danaer's scout-sharp eyes were as skilled on water as land, and he saw the tiny mark of a sail, blacker yet than the distant lowering clouds on the horizon.

"Ah!" Nidil-Zaa exclaimed, swiveling to stare up at the lookout. "Ama's sail, is it not?" At the confirming shout, he slapped a brown hand against the knife at his belt and eagerness seemed to boil out of him, almost a scent. "This time I have her! Mine again! On! Tie down! Yat, put our prisoners by, and we will see to this matter."

Branra and Danaer were prodded toward the waist of the ship, thrust along by the knives and impatient hands of the renegade Yat and several filthy blond Clarique seamen. Three women crouched beneath a cook fly spread at the ship's waist. They were hastily drowning a fire in a brazier, stowing implements in chests.

A hard push from Yat sent Danaer almost sprawling at the feet of one of the women. His ex-patriate captor laughed and ordered, "D'lbain, see they do not leap overboard and drown themselves, these Krantin treasures. Nidil wants the worth of their hides. Hai, you aft! Sword! Ready for Ama! We have her at last!" And he ran toward the stern, exhorting the men there to prepare for battle.

Danaer got to his feet, unsteady in the rocking motion of the boat. Two of the women, hard-faced jades, crouched together like frightened beasts, huddled against the slime-encrusted projection of a hold. But the third woman regarded the two soldiers calmly, her face a mask.

Danaer could not forbear staring at her as she gestured them under the bellying cloth of the fly. Gestured them with her one arm. Danaer was jolted with pity, and wonderment. Her garment hung limply from the shoulder down her right side. Maimed, and aboard the ship of sea bandits? These men who by rapine might have their choice of women, and she was their choice? Why was she here, and how had she survived the brutal sword that one would expect these thieves would use to cut away a life not whole?

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Branra bowed, garbing himself in his nobility. "My Lady D'lbain, our honor to your presence. Forgive us our unheralded arrival."

She gazed at them expressionlessly. This D'lbain was slender, tall, and yellow haired, much a Clarique. Her hair was wild, thick, and paler still than the golden mane of Nidil-Zaa. And her eyes! Alien, fathomless depths—great brown orbs with almost no whites about them, dark mirrors in which a man could see nothing.

"Lady," Danaer ventured, "it must pain you to quench your fire. A woman takes pains with her labor, and then it is despoiled."

Finally an expression flickered across her face, one as mysterious as her presence on this pirate barque. Amusement, pleasure, disbelief? Danaer could not tell. It was a wisp of a smile and her eyes danced with light. Was she a witch? He would not fear her for that. Witches were mortal, as his own witch-woman, Lira, had shown him.

The smile faded, and her eyes looked beyond the two soldiers, horizonward. Warned by her face, Danaer and Branra turned to see. The black sail was no longer a dot. Their own ship was drawing nearer and nearer to the strange vessel.

It was a beautiful, sleek, evil-appearing ship, with black sails billowing as she tacked. She seemed to make no effort to avoid the onrush of Nadil-Zaa's thieving ship, but executed a measured swing to meet his attack.

Now Danaer could see men, weapons at ready, lining her decks, could hear their wordless shouts straining across the waves yet separating the two ships. The evil god-paintings on the bow of the approaching vessel bespoke her occupation.

"Bandit," Branra said softly. "No escape for us there. An encounter between two thief-ships, this. And if they sink each other. . . ."

A woman had climbed the figurehead of the on-coming black sailed ship. She balanced there like some graceful bird, her long fair hair streaming in the wind, the ebony sails outlining her slender form. A short, pale green skirt lashed about her thighs, and a leather corselet did nothing to disguise her femaleness. She seemed a goddess, urging her ship onward, sword in her hand, pointing the attack.

There was a challenging roar at Danaer's left, and he glanced forward to see Nidil-Zaa, perched on the rail of the Qlitos-Gaet, daring his black-sailed opponent to come closer. "Ama! Meet your master, now! Come to me, my beautiful bitch of Tor-Nali!"

Grapnels were flying, and with a sodden smack the two ships struck. The deck rushed away from beneath Danaer and he was flung to hands and knees alongside Branra. The officer exhaled

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through gritted teeth. "We have no balance for this, scout. Wide eyed, now."

The forces of the two bandit ships rushed at each other, over the rails, screaming defiance. Their meeting was a tremendous audible shock. And in an instant there were new screams to vie with those of challenge.

The bows had met, but the waists were still separated, and as yet the battle raged forward. D'lbain did not cower under the fly with the two jades, but leaned against a small hold, peering anxiously toward the melee.

At the moment Yat and a horde of men who had been guarding the ship aft pelted forward along the deck. The dark haired sea bandit paused to thrust D'lbain beside the other women. "Little fool! Bide low!" He turned and shouted to his men, "Arrows! The sail!"

It was a moment frozen in time, and Danaer stared at that homeless Krantin. Yat was alive with joy at the prospect of battle—no more a mere second-in-command aboard a pirate vessel. He was a captain of men, directing a portion of that fight, giving orders. Danaer glanced to his right, at Branra, to see if that young officer might recognize this reflection of himself, here in this eager, filthy thief. To save Branra's pride, he hoped that nobleman would be blind to the resemblance.

The cries and screams came closer as several combatants leapt to the top of a small hold, sparring, slashing. To the general cacophony were now added the shrieks of the two jades, those faceless cowering women beneath the cook-fly. D'lbain lay upon the deck, where she had fallen when Yat thrust her toward safety; she watched the battle without expression, though her eyes were busy, searching.

Before Danaer's gaze, two arm-lengths away, Yat closed with a sun browned bandit from the other ship. It were pain to watch that struggle and yet feel one's hands empty. To see muscles strain and sweat pour, and to know the fight were none of one's own.

A feint, and Yat had put his sword into his opponent's belly with a great gory slash. The two men were so close to him that Danaer saw—almost felt—the dying man's feet grasp prehensilely at the slippery planking before he fell.

And then the dead man's bloody sword, fallen from limp fingers, skittered to a stop at Danaer's feet.

He and Branra bent as one, and Danaer reluctantly drew back his hand, let the young nobleman snatch up the sword. "Patience, scout. We will have one for you as well!"

A bandit skidded around the corner of the hold, and though that sword was firm in Branra's hand the Lord-Captain hesitated.

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The pirate answered Branra's unasked question; his eyes left the young officer and the scout—with contempt, because of their Krantin darkness and inferior height?—and turned to the women. His tongue darted between greedy lips.

An instant later it bled from the clamping of teeth, closing in agony of death as Branra's sword drove upward strongly. Branra put a foot to the chest of the corpse and Danaer grinned, snatching up the second fallen sword. "You keep your word, sir. And are too thorough!"

With a grunt, Branra tugged the weapon free of its fleshy sheath and pointed toward the battle. "We fight for Nidil-Zaa. We have struck a bargain with him for our lives, and little hope for a better."

Exhilarated to feel weapon in hand once more, Danaer ran beside Branra, meeting a new rush from the attackers head on. His first encounter was with a weighty man, carrying too much fat for his height, a height taller than Danaer's own, which was great for a Krant. In younger days this man might have been formidable. But gluttony had exacted its toll. As he parried Danaer's thrusts fear glittered in his pale blue eyes and the sweat on his brow was not solely from exertion. His weight would not tell. Danaer sensed that immediately and grinned with anticipation. It slowed the man, made him clumsy. Parry right, left—and a bit more slowly each time. A feint, and far too leisurely a recovery.

The sword in Danaer's hand bit into soft flesh between neck and shoulder, choking the scream that boiled from the man's mouth with the blood from his throat.

And now another. Care. Branra had wisdom. They must not strike down men from Nidil-Zaa's crew. There would be little chance for their ransoming then. Nidil-Zaa would trade their lives for gold. But would this crew of the strange black-sailed ship, those Sea Riders of Ama?

With a skill long polished, Danaer took down two more of the bandits, learning which to strike in watching Nidil-Zaa and Yat and those faces seen before among the crewmen of the Qlitos-Gaet. If those familiar moved toward a man with grim intent, fair game. And worth testing.

Danaer's second opponent was a challenge—skeleton-thin, fast with a sword. Too thin and almost too fast. His exertions told rapidly upon him and his swordwork, though swift, was not skillful. He had spent no long days on a drill court, honed into a fighting machine, as had been Danaer. Even weakness from an ordeal in the Traecheun Sea could not much lessen a talent so perfected, so woven into the bones of a man. Though pressed, Danaer parried and killed without doubt—at no time concerned he might fail.

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Now a third, his back against a rail. And swordsman or not, a man must give way if driven too strongly. An invading Markuand on the walls of a besieged city, or a sea bandit at the rail of a ship—if a man were pressed sufficiently he fell and died.

No more? Danaer looked about. Had his revenge been taken for their capture? He had been cheated. There were no more targets for his weapon. Perhaps a part of his wrath had been vented upon the Sea-God, for the loss of those good men in the storm. No, that were impiety.

"Ama! It is done—now!"

A tableau played on the bloodied deck. The black-sailed ship—Ama's bandit vessel—had drifted westward, overlapping the track of her conqueror. The sails were lashed by greedy flames, her scuppers dripping yet redder—for Nidil's men had carried the attack to Ama's ship and were as much victors there as on their own deck. The two ships were bound together with grapnels, but it could not be long ere the black-sailed ship died.

And with this as backdrop Nidil-Zaa brought the proud Ama to her knees, her goddess-gold hair twined in his brown, scarred fist, her sword struck from her lax, bleeding fingers. She gazed up at him with flashing hatred in her pale eyes—and yet something else. A wordless plea for mercy, that tender expression women sometimes adopted.

It was useless against this death-named man, this captain of the Qlitos-Gaet. Danaer could not know what these two captains, male and female, both Clarique fair, had meant to one another. But the gods had decreed for them a strange destiny, lust and hate mingled. For Nidil-Zaa fell upon the woman called Ama, not to slay, but to possess, claiming her like a rutting animal, the ribald cheers of his men echoing on every side. The woman's nails raked at him futilely, and her screams were unheeded.

Branra curled a patrician lip. "It confirms my opinion of the barbarism of these Claerq," he muttered, fortunately not so loudly that his scorn could be heard above the shouts of the crew.

True there was that part of a man that lusted, Danaer sensed. And yet . . . Almost without thinking he whispered a prayer to the goddess, lest Argan splinter this bandit ship and send it lifeless down into the merciless sea. But—*this were not* Krant. And the gods here were strong, dark, and male. Here a man might take his will of woman without sacrifice to the goddess, and it be no impiety. Could Argan's call of joy be heard by these blond savages calling themselves sea bandits?

Nidil-Zaa left Ama spent upon the deck, tears mingling with the blood from her wounds. Naked, he turned the drove his men on to possess the burning hulk of

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Ama's ship, rive it of whatever booty it might hold. He bid two lesser thieves drag the brutalized woman aft, bind her against escape, there to await his further pleasure.

Those two sweating brutes did this, flinging the hapless woman between Branra and Danaer, hurling her among the other women. "Bind her!" they ordered, and then hastened to claim their share of Ama's vessel.

Danaer looked to see the women comfort their outraged sister, but the two jades hurried to tie Ama's hands fast, ignoring her wince of pain as the rope bit into her wrists. D'lbain stood to one side, staring. There was a hint of pity in her large dark eyes, but she said nothing.

"My Lord . . ."

"Still." Branra was grim. "I know your goddess rebels within you at this, Destre. But we do not interfere. We are captives, our lives in Nidil-Zaa's hands. We may not do our will."

Ama raised her head, tears drying on her cheeks, and stared at them.

"Argan will strike that impious bejit down," Danaer said.

"Impious? I think not—here. Your goddess must run weak, here, so far from her Vas-Tre Plains. These gods worship not love, that taking of joy of male and female in adoration of her. Guard your tongue."

Danaer obeyed, worrying. He now and again glanced at the sky, half expecting a fiery lance to strike out of the lowering clouds and rend the Qlitos-Gaet in twain.

The crew of Nidil-Zaa completed their rape of Ama's ship, reboarded their own vessel and let the beautiful black-sailed ship float away, down in the water, sinking to her dark grave. The death-named captain gave orders and his own ship heeled sharply, set course. He strolled back to the waist, ignored his two Krantin captives to gaze upon Ama. Bound, she was not yet abject. She met his eyes fiercely.

Branra and Danaer parted that Nidil-Zaa might pass between them, aware of the ready weapons on every hand despite the swords they yet held.

Nidil-Zaa stood before Ama, reached down and pulled her head back by that handle of her golden hair. "You are mine again, Ama. This time you shall never depart from me."

"I am no longer yours to claim," she spat at him.

His laughter was evil, hard. "You are taken, Ama. As you once gave yourself freely. And the Qlitos-Gaet shall again be yours, as a prison, if you choose, or as your palace, if *I* choose."

She did not try to wrest her hair from his fist but glared unblinkingly at him. And there was that in her gaze that made Danaer shiver. Could not this man see the warning there, or did his unweening pride blind him?

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"Hear me, Nidil-Zaa of the Qlitos-Gaet, I *am* a queen, and gifted beyond your imagining. On the worst of your nights you will not forget that you have dishonored me. And you shall pay with your blood—and the blood of all those of the Qlitos-Gaet."

Nidil turned from her, uneasy, let her silken hair slide through his fingers. For the first time he seemed to see Danaer and Branra with swords in their hands. The sight brightened his suddenly paled face. "Warriors! It were well you were aboard. You have earned those weapons. Keep them sharp against my enemies, and you may hold them yet a while. But guard their use."

"We thank you," Branra said gravely, a bite of sarcasm in his voice. Danaer knew it were wise a confrontation had been thus avoided, for Branra would not easily surrender that sword now in his hand.

The Qlitos-Gaet rode over the foaming sea, northward, swiftly, catching the wind. Danaer knew nothing of ships, but this vessel sped as one might imagine a god-touched sea rider would. The captaining of one named for the Death-God might be a sufficient blessing, or curse, to call up control of wind and wave.

The women prepared food, fed the crew, offered leavings to the prisoners. Danaer, unsure his belly would accept anything, reluctantly took a portion of cold fish from D'lbain's hands. One of the jades knelt to give food to Ama. That ravaged beauty opened her mouth, then spewed the proffered food back upon her captor. "Do the same to Nidil-Zaa, if you would feed me. He of dishonor."

D'lbain said softly, "It is the way of it. You tasted freedom and honor beyond any woman touched by the sea. Were it not so?"

The eyes turned up to her were bright with hate. "You long ago lost your honor, woman of Yat. He took you, lonely in his alienness, here in a world of fair people. And because you bewitched away from him his fear of your unwholeness, you remain aboard. Could that veil fall from his eyes—would he want you then?"

Danaer covertly studied the one-armed woman, expecting anger to flare, her nails to strike at Ama. But D'lbain merely repeated, "It is the way of it. We are helpless, and must take that granted to us—and had you not deserted him, there would be gentleness in Nidil even now."

There were no more words from Ama. She retreated within herself, a black coldness clothing her almost naked form. The women avoided her, the jades fearfully, D'lbain with calm pity.

The Qlitos-Gaet drove onward, even with darkness. The leaping of the bandit vessel troubled Daner's attempts to sleep. He lay upon the reeking deck, sword in hand, tormented by the memory of what had spun out before his eyes that day. Nearby, Branra's

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breathing was light and very even. That officer slept little if at all when danger was near, and it did seem very near. Was Nidil-Zaa so impious he was deaf?

Ama did not sleep. Danaer gazed into the darkness. There was pale moonlight, enough to limn the fair form of that captive sea queen. Ama raised her bound hands heavenward and chanted, "Wyolak of the Great Winds, Rorsa of the Merciless Rain—hear me against your sacred brother Qlitos! Bear my prayer to him whom I desire. Hayine-La! Hayine-La! Sing to your bride, beckon our spawn! Avenge me! Avenge me!"

It was a soft, horrible keening, but the crewmen seemed heedless. They did no more than grumble from beyond the holds or their watch posts. And then Nidil-Zaa strode out of the darkness, lifted the thrashing, crying body of Ama and bore her away. She did not scream, but her prayers continued, fading in Danaer's ears. Faintly, her call to Hayine-La echoed after her.

Hayine-La. It was not the name of a god or goddess Danaer had ever known or heard spoken. He dreaded to learn its source. He called upon Argan's smile, begged the goddess of the Vas-Tre might span that expanse between her sacred land and this and ward off the evil here brewing.

Mid-morning, and Nidil-Zaa bid Branra and Danaer join him forward, in the bow of the Qlitos-Gaet. He pointed and said, "There." Danaer gazed in the direction the captain had indicated. A dark hulk of land was rising out of the Traecheun Sea, bobbing left and right as the ship shifted with the waves.

"It is Tor-Nali?"

"Ai. Where would camp your Royal Commander? I must know where to put in safely, that I may ransom you."

"He would make for Walis. It is held by a Claerq general, under siege. If the sea bandits would but join together to aid the fleet, it would . . ."

"We aid no Krantin army against an invader from across the Great Eastern Sea. It is not our quarrel."

The wind was driving them fair and the mass of Tor-Nali seemed to leap higher every moment above the horizon of the sea. They could not be far away, now. And then they would be free of this hulk and her barbarian crew, walk once more on dry land, among those warm in their hearts.

Abruptly the sky darkened, as though a god's hand had passed between man below and Peluva's shining golden burden above. Danaer and Branra peered upward curiously. Fear gnawed at Danaer's belly, and it grew as a crewman ran to Nidil-Zaa. "Ama! She calls on a sea god! Quiet her, Nidil!"

They followed him aft, found it was as the crewman had said. Ama keened more loudly now,

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fury in her pale eyes. And as she saw Nidil-Zaa she stood and held out her bound hands to him, not in supplication but in demand. "Release me, spawn of the sea, or you will die in it. I will call upon Hayine-La to spare you. For that which we once gave in joy to the gods. The gods will take it from you—as it will take me—and the Qlitos-Gaet!"

The crewmen drew away from her in terror, and the jades crawled to cover. Only D'lbain dared stay close to Ama. Yat approached her, caught her arm, pleaded. She did not look at him, and as Ama shrieked still another warning that Krantin sea bandit cringed from the sound, forbore to demand his woman stir.

Nidil-Zaa swept a long arm around, struck Ama with his knuckles, spilling blood from her mouth. It quieted her only a moment. The sky was black now, the wind howling, and lightning walked about its namesake ship. Qlitos the Lightning God tore at the Qlitos-Gaet.

"Kant, prodra Argan," Danaer prayed, wishing desperately for the firm ground of the Vas-Tre Plains beneath his feet.

"Speak to your goddess for me," Branra said against the wind. "I think we have forces here beyond Nidil's understanding. And we may all drink the sea before long."

Danaer pointed with his sword, Argan's sacred name freezing on his lips. At last he found his voice. "God spawn, My Lord Branra! You spoke the truth!"

Nidil-Zaa whirled, staring, and the crewman screamed in horror as a beast out of the imaginings of the Dark God, Bogotana, reared from the sea, looming over the ship. It had stepped from the tales of mariners and traders, heard even by Danaer on the sealess plains: Dragon. Great, scaled, and its fishy hide a glittering green, it was something escaped from the fevered dreams of a dying man. Its huge reptilian head plucked at men on the deck, seizing them, piercing them with lance-like teeth. A snake-thin neck swayed sinuously between that head and the sea. What hieous alien body might lurk there beneath the storm-tossed waves?

"Son of Hayine-La!" Ama cried joyfully. "Kill them! Kill them all! You of my loins—thy father the Storm-God grant thee the power. Hayine-La—strike!"

Danaer knew that monster could never have been borne of mortal woman and man—but what might a god spawn on the body of her called Ama?

Witchcraft, this!

Nidil-Zaa drew sword, hacked at the scaly beast, and Danaer and Branra aided him. There must be destruction for all if this monster prevailed.

Behind them Ama exhorted her devil child. "They have promised you power, my princeling. They from the east, they the white-clad, the silent. The Markuand

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will aid us. All else are enemies. Strike!"

Markuand. Markuand had wrought this, with its wizards. Ama might be a Clarique, but for this slimy abomination of her loins she had sold her soul to those alien invaders. Infinite power was hers. It was no longer a matter between Nidil-Zaa and the woman he would rule with his body. Such a dragon could rend the fleet of the Royal Commander in a thousand pieces. It must be stopped.

Branra flanked Nidil-Zaa on the right, and Danaer moved strongly at the captain's left. His sword bit into the sea beast's hide, splintering scales and sending the fragments flying sharply into his own face. Blood weltered on Danaer's forehead, began to interfere with his vision. He must make sure his sword worked well, or there was no hope.

The dragon's snaked neck reached over them, its huge mouth gulping at a hapless crewman trying to escape. The man's blood poured over Danaer, Branra and Nidil, dying screams dinning at their ears. Great scaled feet were now on the rail, and the Qlitos-Gaet began to list dangerously. It would never take the weight of this devil spawn. They would sink.

"Kill them!" Ama was crying joyously.

Nadil-Zaa turned, his back to the monstrosity that was destroying his ship. His voice bespoke the agony of his soul. "Do not, Ama! Call away your devil child."

"The god has heard me. This gift of the Markuand will hear me!"

Danaer lost his footing on the tilting deck, clutched at the rail, held his sword over his head, stabbing at the underthroat of the beast. He looked, saw Ama hold out her hands to D'lbain, pleading. In a moment frozen in time and chaos, Danaer watched D'lbain draw a tiny dagger, cut Ama's bonds.

Triumph ruled Ama's face as she ran forward, arms upraised. She was running for the sea dragon, leaping over the gouted, torn remains of its victims, lunging for its neck. She would embrace it. Danaer sensed she need not fear it, that truly it was the child of her loins, its seed a god's—or a wizard's.

She did not reach its glittering body. Nidil-Zaa plunged his sword through her pale body, caught Ama as she fell. And the air was rent with a cry most fearsome and unhuman. That great scaled neck writhed and the blood-smeared snout of the sea beast angled upward. The clouds were torn with awful lightnings that immediately began to fade as, with a moaning song, Hayine-La's spawn sank out of sight. Its claws raked across the deck, shredding the pitiful remnants of men's bodies there.

And the ship was free. It listed heavily, bobbed like a child's

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plaything, then slowly righted itself. The clouds were parting, sunlight making its way through the infernal blackness of moments before.

Danaer and Branra leaned on the remains of a splintered rail, staring at the spot where the beast had disappeared. Froth spewed up upon the sea, but of the unholy dragon there was no other sign. It was gone as suddenly as it had come.

"The son of Hayine-La is gone," Danaer murmured, and added a paryer that it return no more.

They turned to find Nidil-Zaa kneeling upon the deck, the broken, torn body of Ama in his arms. He stroked again and again her yellow silken hair. And he wept. Danaer marveled, then realized these were tears of fury as much as loss.

The captain of the Qlitos-Gaet raised his head, stared at D'lbain. Danaer wondered if he and Branra would be able to defend that maimed woman. There was no need. She spoke before Nidil-Zaa could accuse her. "She would be free. She was not to be caged, ever again. The Sea God had claimed her, long before she knew your touch anew, Nidil-Zaa. She would never have been yours. It was her will to be free—to die free if the gods decreed."

"Yes," he said brokenly. "It is done. It were the will of those she spoke. She invoked wizardry."

"Ai, you would know that, you who wive a witch-woman. Yet look, there is Tor-Nali, and the fleet. We will soon be with the Royal Commander, and there will be time then to speak to the captain of the Qlitos-Gaet of the enemy—of an enemy which slays his woman with witchcraft."

"It is not the time to speak," Danaer agreed. "The gods must choose the time." He turned his eyes toward the looming shore of the island of Tor-Nali. He thought of his woman, of Lira, and her power against this wizardry, and was glad, longing for her touch of body to body and soul to soul. "Give Nidil-Zaa time to mourn, until he may realize the cause of his loss. Then he shall earn his name, and his anger will truly make him a death god against those eastern invaders who have cheated him."

Yat was trying to speak to D'lbain, but she gave him no response. That maimed woman stared to where Nidil-Zaa mourned over her who once was one flesh with him, and once one heart. Was there pity in D'lbain's eyes—or a deep longing to be as Ama was, now—free?

—JUANITA COULSON

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DISSENTING

The New Wave vs. Old controversey has largely died; the combatants have retired to lick their wounds or take up new causes and the dust has settled. Yet the moment remains for a touch of humor. "Gardner R. Dubious" is the creation of Mike Glicksohn, former co-publisher of the Hugo-winning fanzine, Energumen, *and "Dissenting" marks his first professional sale . . .*

GARDNER R. DUBIOUS

SLOWLY, RELUCTANTLY, his mind fought its way through the black haze back to consciousness. Somewhere a cockroach scuttled. Bleerily he stared with blank incomprehension at the cracks in the ceiling, at the hanging sections of plaster that somehow never fell, resisting with some unknown strength the forces of entropy that sought dominion over his world. Another day had begun.

Gradually, from out of the gray, formless chaos of blessed sleep, his thoughts began to coalesce. His blind staring took on purpose as he traced the familiar patterns in the dirty plain of the ceiling. There was something reassuring in the recognition of often-seen designs; a sort of mental liturgy that calmed through repetition and prepared him for the hours to come. His gaze wandered downwards.

The big spider was still there in the corner, far away from where his shapeless mattress lay on the dirty floor. A bloated fly struggled to escape the sticky strands, buzzing fitfully in its helplessness. Often he thought of trying to kill the spider, but as the lone living entity of any permanence in his world, it enjoyed a special status. And he marvelled yet again at the monstrous implacability of fate that somehow invariably thrust the occasional insect that invaded his room into that corner, to be trapped, without understanding or hope. (And was it mere imagination that made him think of late that it was the *same* fly that repeated this purposeless ritual? Surely flies are distinguishable beings? He ought to look more closely into that, but some how he never did.)

Following one main supporting thread of the intricately patterned web, his eye came to the top corner of the window frame, with its cracked and blackened wood, and thence to the window itself. Had it always been bricked up? Wasn't there a time when the bricks had been *outside* the frame, indicating the existence of

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places beyond these four confining walls? He couldn't remember. And what did it matter anyway?

His eye continued on its familiar path, crossing the battered old table with its desert of yellow and gray and brown papers, then leaping upwards to the nearby mountain of boxes, each crammed with purple and black and gray pages spilling haphazardly in random directions. From the top of that mountain his gaze jumped quickly, as it always did, to the shining beauty of the typewriter that rose gleaming with strength and purpose from the surrounding paper sea. A bitter smile touched his lips.

A lone oasis of freshness in an ocean of decay, the pristine mechanical perfection exerted its usual pull on him. Here was reality! Here was the meaning of existance! With a purpose born of despair, he struggled from the confining restraints of the rotting gray blanket and turned towards the door. He knew what he would see . . .

. . . and, of course, they were there. Under the slot in the door (had it ever opened, or was that too a dream?), scattered around in the formless pattern produced by gravity, a chaotic pile of brown envelopes, folded pages of all colours and textures, a seemingly endless set of variations on the basic format. With a sureness born of countless prior journeys he staggered to the door, navigating with some primordial instinct around the formless clutter of the room, avoiding, as always, the dog shit (what, he occasionally wondered, was a dog? But there was little time for such speculation) and gathered together the precious fanzines.

How did they get there, these fanzines? He'd never known, and now he didn't care. At first he had tried to determine how they came, had tried to stay awake to watch their arrival, but that had simply meant a day without fanzines. Or food. He had quickly learned what was expected of him. They came, and that was all that mattered. Just as he knew that later in the day he could open the small cupboard in the wall and find his meal inside. He did not question this. It was a fact of existance.

A heavy load today. He would have to work hard in order to finish. And finish he must, for tomorrow was another day. He slowly opened the first cover, still, after all this time, experiencing that faint gleam of hope that started each new day. But, as always, that hope immediately turned to futile despair. There on the contents page he saw again another permutation of the words he'd read a thousand times before: "The New Wave—An Appreciation." Too tired to even sigh, he turned to the page in question.

He knew it all by heart, of course, but he had to read the exact phrasings so his rebuttal

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would be accurate. Once he'd tried to respond without carefully reading the article. His mind still refused to think of the consequences . . . Weariedly he rolled a sheet of paper into the typewriter and began to argue against the article he'd just read. The words came easily, as he repeated the familiar arguments in yet another variation. He'd done it before; he'd do it again. And yet he believed in what he wrote, and could even feel a certain excitement as the dissenting opinions took form on the paper before him. It was so simple to put down the fools who wrote in support of that New Wave rubbish! He admired the phrases that came so easily to his fingertips: "mindless, nihilistic nonsense. . . ," "meaningless futility of function. . . . ," "bleakly barren backgrounds. . . .," "squallid senseless anti-heroes. . ." How could anyone take that sort of fiction seriously? And yet the articles in favour of it continued to appear, and to demand his lone opposing voice.

With almost a flourish he finished by typing ". . . these meaningless exercises in writing, without explanation or resolution." and pulled the letter from the machine. Mechanically he addressed the envelope, inserted the letter, sealed it, and placed it to one side. The unknown forces that brought the fanzines would also remove the day's output of letters. This, too, he no longer questioned. Questions were never answered, and they interrupted the pattern of his existence.

Initial enthusiasm already on the wane, he reached for the next fanzine. This was dittoed, almost illegible, which would slow him down. He felt momentary annoyance, which gave way to weary resignation. He sought and found the piece. And inserted another sheet of paper. In this way he must, and did, spend the day. Read the fanzine. Refute the senseless praise of that negativistic rubbish that denied his sense of wonder. Read another fanzine. Deny another article. Read another fanzine . . . Until, finally, eyes aching with fatigue, fingers ablaze with pain, he reached the end of the stack, and was allowed to collapse into blissful oblivion.

For tomorrow would bring more fanzines. He knew that with a dreadful certainty. And more articles glorifying fiction about the meaningless drudgery of existence. Articles he would have to refute for the nonsense he knew them to be. Poised on the brink of unconsciousness, his mind almost formulated a question, almost saw a contradiction, but he was too exhausted to complete it. He fell asleep. As he had before. And would again.

In the corner, a spider waited patiently.

—Gardner R. Dubious
(Mike Glicksohn)

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This one's a sleeper . . . I know nothing about Ian McEwan except by inference: that he is British and that his command of this story exhibits a masterful touch as he deals with elements which in the hands of lesser writers would have led to disaster: a fractured marriage, a collection of diaries almost a century old, and a new concept of–

SOLID GEOMETRY

IAN McEWAN

ILLUSTRATED by RICHARD OLSEN

IN MELTON MOWBRAY in 1875 at an auction of articles of "curiosity and worth" my great grandfather, in the company of M. his friend, bid for the penis of Captain Nicholls who died in Horsemonger jail in 1873. It was bottled in a glass twelve inches long and, noted my great grandfather in his diary that night, "in a beautiful state of preservation." Also for auction was the 'the unnamed portion of the late Lady Barrymore. It went to Sam Israels for fifty guineas.' My great grandfather was keen on the idea of having the two items as a pair and M. dissuaded him. This illustrates perfectly their friendship. My great grandfather the excitable theorist, M. the man of action who knew when to bid at auctions. My great grandfather lived for sixty nine years. For forty five of them, at the end of every day, he sat down before going to bed and wrote his thoughts in a diary. These diaries are on my table now, forty five volumes bound in calf leather, and to the left sits Capt. Nicholls in the glass jar. My great grandfather lived on the income derived from the patent of an invention of his father, a handy fastener used by corset makers right up till the outbreak of the First World War. My great grandfather liked gossip, numbers and theories. He also liked tobacco, good port, jugged hare and, very occasionally, opium. He liked to think of himself as a mathematician, though he never had a job, and never published a book. Nor did he ever travel or get his name in the Times, even when he died. In 1869 he married Alice, only daughter of the Rev. Toby Shadwell, co-author of a not highly regarded book on English wild flowers. I believe my great grandfather to have been a very fine diarist and when I have finished editing the diaries and they are published I am certain he will receive the recognition due to him.

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When my work is over I will take a long holiday, travel somewhere cold and clean and treeless, Iceland or the Russian Steppes. I used to think that at the end of it all I would try, if it was possible, to divorce my wife Maisie, but now there is no need at all.

OFTEN Maisie would shout in her sleep and I would have to wake her.

"Put you arm around me," she would say, "It was a horrible dream. I had it once before. I was in a plane flying over a desert. But it wasn't really a desert. I took the plane lower and I could see there were thousands of babies heaped up, stretching away into the horizon, all of them naked and climbing over each other. I was running out of fuel and I had to land the plane. I tried to find a space, I flew on and on looking for a space . . ."

"Go to sleep now," I said through a yawn. "It was only a dream."

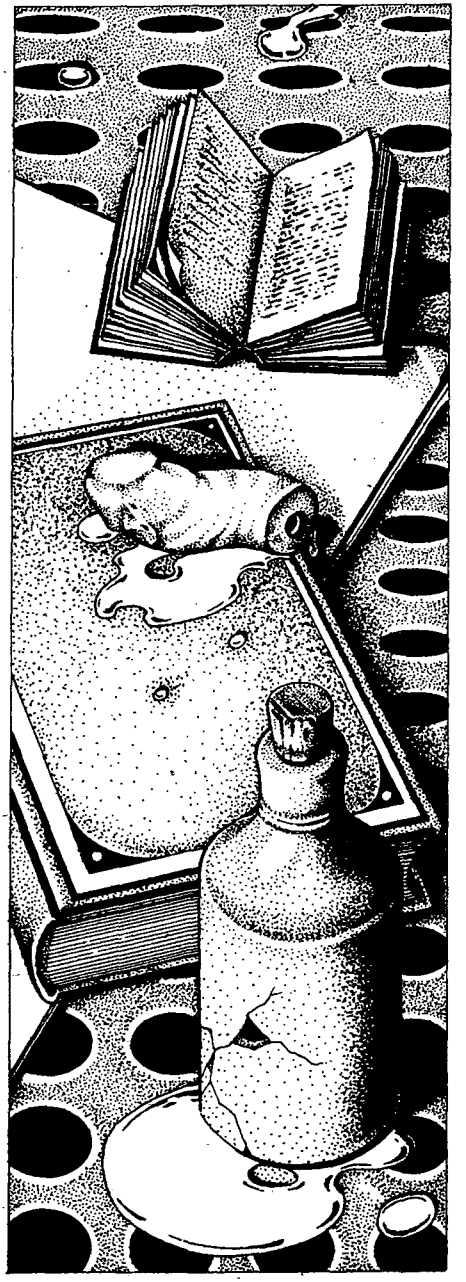
"No," she cried. "I mustn't go to sleep, not just yet."

"Well I have to sleep now," I told her. "I have to be up early in the morning." She shook my shoulder.

"Please don't go to sleep yet, don't leave me here."

"I'm in the same bed," I said. "I won't leave you."

"It makes no difference, don't leave me awake . . ." But my eyes were already closing.



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LATELY I have taken up my great grandfather's habit. Before going to bed I sit down for half an hour and think over the day. I have no mathematical whimsies or sexual theories to note down. Mostly I write out what Maisie has said to me and what I have said to Maisie. Sometimes, for complete privacy, I lock myself in the bathroom, sit on the toilet seat and balance the writing pad on my knees. Apart from me there is occasionally a spider or two in the bathroom. They climb up the waste pipe and crouch perfectly still on the glaring white enamel. They must wonder where they have come to. After hours of crouching they turn back, puzzled or perhaps disappointed they could not learn more. As far as I can tell, my great grandfather made only one reference to spiders. On May 8th, 1906 he wrote, "Bismarck is a spider."

IN THE AFTERNOONS Maisie used to bring me tea and tell me her nightmares. Usually I was going through old newspapers, compiling indexes, cataloguing items, putting down this volume, picking up another. Maisie said she was in a bad way. Recently she had been sitting around the house all day glancing at books on psychology and the occult, and almost every night she had bad dreams. Since the time we exchanged physical blows, lying in wait to hit each other with the same shoe outside the bathroom, I have had little sympathy for her. Part of her problem is jealousy. She is very jealous . . . of my great grandfather's forty-five-volume diary, and of my purpose and energy in editing it. She was doing nothing. I was putting down one volume and picking up another when Maisie came in with the tea.

"Can I tell you my dream?" she asked. "I was flying this plane over a kind of desert . . ."

"Tell me later, Maisie," I said. "I'm in the middle of something here." After she had gone I stared at the wall in front of my desk and thought about M. who came to talk and dine with my great grandfather regularly over a period of fifteen years up until his sudden and unexplained departure one evening in 1898. M., whoever he might have been, was something of an academic, as well as a man of action. For example, on the evening of August 9th 1870 the two of them are talking about positions for lovemaking and M. tells my great grandfather that copulation *a posteriori* is the most natural way owing to the position of the clitoris and because other anthropoids favour this method. My great grandfather, who copulated about half a dozen times in his entire life, and that with Alice during the first year of their marriage, wondered out loud what the Church's view was and straight away M. is able to tell him that the seventh century theologian Theodore considered

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copulation *a posteriori* a sin ranking with masturbation and therefore worthy of forty penances. Later in the same evening my great grandfather produced mathmatical evidence that the maximum number of positions cannot exceed the prime number seventeen. M. scoffed at this and told him he had seen a collection of drawings by Romano, a pupil of Raphael's, in which twenty four positions were shown. And he said he had heard of a Mr. F.K. Forberg who had accounted for ninety. By the time I remembered the tea Maisie had left by my elbow it was cold.

AN IMPORTANT STAGE in the deterioration of our marriage was reached as follows. I was sitting in the bathroom one evening writing out a conversation Maisie and I had about the Tarot pack when suddenly she was outside, rapping on the door and rattling the door handle.

"Open the door," she called out. "I want to come in."

I said to her, "You'll have to wait a few minutes more. I've almost finished."

"Let me in now," she shouted. "You're not using the toilet."

"Wait," I replied, and wrote another line or two. Now Maisie was kicking the door.

"My period has started and I need to get something." I ignored her yells and finished my piece which I considered to be particularly important. If I left it till later certain details would be lost. There was no sound from Maisie now and I assumed she was in the bedroom. But when I opened the door she was standing right in my way with a shoe in her hand. She brought the heel of it sharply down on my head, and I only had time to move slightly to one side. The heel caught the top of my ear and cut it badly.

"There," said Maisie, stepping round me to get to the bathroom, "Now we are both bleeding," and she banged the door shut. I picked up the shoe and stood quietly and patiently outside the bathroom holding a handkerchief to my bleeding ear. Maisie was in the bathroom about ten minutes and as she came out I caught her neatly and squarely on the top of her head. I did not give her time to move. She stood perfectly still for a moment looking straight into my eyes.

"You worm," she breathed, and went down to the kitchen to nurse her head out of my sight.

DURING SUPPER yesterday Maisie claimed that a man locked in a cell with only the Tarot cards would have access to all knowledge. She had been doing a reading that afternoon and the cards were still spread about the floor.

"Could he work out the street plan of Calparaiso from the cards?" I asked.

"You're being stupid," she replied.

"Could it tell him the best way

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to start a laundry business, the best way to make an omlette or a kidney machine?"

"Your mind is so narrow," she complained. "You're so narrow, so predictable."

"Could he," I insisted, "tell me who M. is or why. . . ."

"Those things don't matter," she cried. "They're not necessary."

"They are still knowledge. Could he find them out?"

She hesitated. "Yes, he could."

I smiled and said nothing.

"What's so funny?" she said. I shrugged, and she began to get angry. She wanted to be disproved. "Why did you ask all those pointless questions?"

I shrugged again. "I just wanted to know if you really meant *everything*."

Maisie banged the table and screamed. "Damn you! Why are you always trying me out? Why don't you say something real?" And with that we both recognized we had reached the point where all our discussions led and we subsided into bitter silence.

WORK ON THE DIARIES cannot proceed until I have cleared up the mystery surrounding M. After coming to dinner on and off for fifteen years and supplying my great grandfather with a mass of material for his theories, M. simply disappears from the pages of the diary. On Tuesday December 6th my great grandfather invited M. to dine on the following Saturday, and although M. came my great grandfather in the entry for that day simply writes, 'M. to dinner.' On any other day the conversation at these meals is recorded at great length. M. had been to dinner on Monday 5th of December and the conversation had been about geometry, and the entries for the rest of that week are entirely given over to the same subject. There is absolutely no hint of antagonism. Besides, my great grandfather *needed* M. M. provided his material, M. knew what was going on, he was familiar with London and he had been on the Continent a number of times. He knew all about socialism and Darwin, he had an acquaintance in the free love movement, a friend of James Hinton. M. was *in* the world in a way which my great grandfather, who left Melton Mowbray only once in his life time to visit Nottingham, was not. Even as a young man my great grandfather preferred to theorise by the fireside; all he needed were the materials M. supplied. For example, one evening in June 1884 M., who was just back from London, gave my great grandfather an account of how the streets of the town were fouled and clogged by horse dung. Now in that same week my great grandfather had been reading the essay by Malthus called 'On the Principle of Population.' That night he made an excited entry in the diary about a pamphlet he

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wanted to write and have published. It was to be called 'De Stercorae Equorum.' The pamphlet was never published and probably never written, but there are detailed notes in the diary entries for the two weeks following that evening. In 'De Stercorae Equorum' (Concerning Horseshit) he assumes a geometric growth in the horse population and working from detailed street plans he predicted that the metropolis would be impassible by 1935. By impassible he took to mean an average thickness of one foot (compressed) in every major street. He described involved experiments outside his own stables to determine the compressibility of horse dung which he managed to express mathematically. It was all pure theory, of course. His results rested on the assumption that no dung would be shovelled aside in the fifty years to come. Very likely it was M. who talked my great grandfather out of the project.

ONE MORNING, after a long dark night of Maisie's nightmares, we were lying side by side in bed and I said,

"What is it you really want? Why don't you go back to your job? These long walks, all this analysis, sitting around the house, lying in bed all morning, the Tarot pack, the nightmares . . . what is it you want?"

And she said, "I want to get my head straight," which she had said many times before.

I said, "Your head, your mind, it's not like a hotel kitchen, you know, you can't throw stuff out like old tin cans. It's more like a river than a place, moving and changing all the time. You can't make rivers flow straight."

"Don't go through all that again she said. "I'm not trying to make rivers flow straight, I'm trying to get my head straight."

"You've got to *do* something," I told her. "You can't do nothing. Why not go back to your job? You didn't have nightmares when you were working. You were never so unhappy when you were working."

"I've got to stand back from all that," she said. "I'm not sure what any of it means."

"Fashion," I said, "it's all fashion. Fashionable metaphors, fashionable reading, fashionable malaise. What do you care about Jung, for example? You've read twelve pages in a month."

"Don't go on," she pleaded, "You know it leads nowhere."

But I went on.

"You've never been anywhere," I told her, "you've never done anything. You're a nice girl without even the blessing of an unhappy childhood. Your sentimental Buddism, this junk shop mysticism, joss stick therapy, magazine astrology. . . . none of it is yours, you've worked none of it out for yourself. You fell into it, you fell into a swamp of respectable intuitions. You haven't the

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originality or passion to intuit anything yourself beyond your own unhappiness. Why are you filling your mind with other people's mystic banalities and giving yourself nightmares?" I got out of bed, opened the curtains and began to get dressed.

"You talk like this was a fiction seminar," Maisie said. "Why are you trying to make things worse for me?" Self pity began to well up from inside her, but she fought it down. "When you are talking," she went on, "I can feel myself, you know, being screwed up like a piece of paper."

"Perhaps we are in a fiction seminar," I said grimly. Maisie sat up in bed staring at her lap. Suddenly her tone changed. She patted the pillow beside her and said softly,

"Come over here. Come and sit here. I want to touch you, I want you to touch me . . ." But I was sighing, and already on my way to the kitchen.

In the kitchen I made myself some coffee and took it through to my study. It had occurred to me in my night of broken sleep that a possible clue to the disappearance of M. might be found in pages of geometry. I had always skipped through them before because mathematics does not interest me. On the Monday, December 5th, 1898, M. and my great grandfather discussed the *vescis piscis*, which apparently is the subject of Euclid's first proposition and a profound influence on the groundplans of many ancient religious buildings. I read through the account of the conversation carefully, trying to understand as best I could the geometry of it. Then, turning the page, I found a lengthy anecdote which M. told my great grandfather that same evening when the coffee had been brought in, and the cigars were lit. Just as I was beginning to read Maisie came in.

"And what about you," she said, as if there had not been an hour break in our exchange. "All you have is books. Crawling over the past like a fly on a turd." I was angry, of course, but I smiled and said cheerfully.

"Crawling? Well at least I'm moving."

"You don't speak to me anymore," she said, "You play me like a pin ball machine, for points."

"Good morning Hamlet," I replied, and sat in my chair waiting patiently for what she had to say next. But she did not speak; she left, closing the study door softly behind her.

IN SEPTEMBER 1870," M. began to tell my great grandfather, "I came into the possession of certain documents which not only invalidate everything fundamental to our science of solid geometry but also undermine the whole canon of our physical laws and force one to redefine one's place in Nature's scheme. These papers outweigh in importance the com-

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bined work of Marx and Darwin. They were entrusted to me by a young American mathematician, and they are the work of David Hunter, a mathematician too and a Scotsman. The American's name was Goodman. I had corresponded with his father over a number of years in connection with his work on the cyclical theory of menstration which, incredibly enough, is still widely discredited in this country. I met the young Goodman in Vienna where, along with Hunter and mathematicians from a dozen countries, he had been attending an international conference on mathematics. Goodman was pale and greatly disturbed when I met him, and planned to return to America the following day even though the conference was not yet half complete. He gave the papers into my care with instructions that I was to deliver them to David Hunter if I was ever to learn of his whereabouts. And then, only after much persuasion and insistence on my part, he told me what he had witnessed on the third day of the conference. The conference met every morning at nine thirty when a paper was read and a general discussion ensued. At eleven o'clock refreshments were brought in and many of the mathematicians would get up from the long, highly polished table round which they were all gathered and stroll about the large, elegant room and engage in informal discussions with their colleagues. Now, the conference lasted two weeks, and by a long-standing arrangement the most eminent of the mathematicians read their papers first, followed by the slightly less eminent, and so on in a descending hierachy throughout the two weeks, which caused, as it is wont to do among highly intelligent men, occasional but intense jealousies. Hunter, though a brilliant mathematician, was young and virtually unknown outside his university which was Edinburgh. He had applied to deliver what he described as a very important paper on solid geometry, and since he was of little account in this pantheon he was assigned to read to the conference on the last day but one, by which time many of the most important figures would have returned to their respective countries. And so on the third morning, as the servants were bringing in the refreshments, Hunter stood up suddenly and addressed his colleagues just as they were rising from their seats. He was a large, shaggy man and, though young, he had about him a certain presence which reduced the hum of conversation to a complete silence.

" 'Gentlemen,' said Hunter, "I must ask you to forgive this improper form of address, but I have something to tell you of the utmost importance. I have discovered the plane without a surface." Amid derisive smiles and gentle, bemused laughter, Hunter

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picked up from the table a large white sheet of paper. With a pocket knife he made an incision along its surface about three inches long and slightly to one side of its centre. Then he made some rapid, complicated folds and, holding the paper aloft so all could see, he appeared to draw one corner of it through the incision and as he did so it disappeared.

" 'Behold, gentleman,' said Hunter, holding out his empty hands towards the company, 'the plane without a surface.' "

MAISIE CAME INTO my room, washed now and smelling faintly of perfumed soap. She came and stood behind my chair and placed her hands on my shoulders.

"What are you reading?" she said.

"Just bits of the diary which I haven't looked at before." She began to massage me gently at the base of my neck. I would have found it soothing if it had still been the first year of our marriage. But it was the sixth year and it generated a kind of tension which communicated itself the length of my spine. Maisie wanted something. To restrain her I placed my right hand on her left and, mistaking this for affection, she leaned forward and kissed under my ear. Her breath smelled of toothpaste and toast. She tugged at my shoulder.

"Let's go in the bedroom," she whispered. "We haven't made love for nearly two weeks now."

"I know," I replied. "You know how it is . . . with my work." I felt no desire for Maisie or any other woman. All I wanted to do was turn the next page of my great grandfather's diary. Maisie took her hands off my shoulder and stood by my side. There was such a sudden ferocity in her silence that I found myself tensing like a sprinter on the starting line. She stretched forward and picked up the sealed jar containing Capt. Nicholls. As she lifted it his penis drifted dreamily from one end of the glass to the other.

"You're so *complacent*," Maisie shrieked just before she hurled the glass bottle at the wall in front of my table. Instinctively I covered my face with my hands to shield off the shattering glass. As I opened my eyes I heard myself saying,

"Why did you do that? That belonged to my great grandfather." Amid the broken glass and the rising stench of formaldehyde lay Capt. Nicholls, slouched across the leather covers of a volume of the diary, grey, limp, and menacing, transformed from a treasured curiosity into a horrible obscenity.

"That was a terrible thing to do. Why did you do that?" I said again.

"I'm going for a walk," Maisie replied and slammed the door this time as she left the room.

I DID NOT MOVE from my chair

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for a long time. Maisie had destroyed an object of great value to me. It had stood in his study while he lived, and then it stood in mine, linking my life with his. I picked a few splinters of glass from my lap and stared at the hundred and sixty year old piece of another human on my table. I looked at it and thought of all the homunculae which had swarmed down its length. I thought of all the places it had been, Cape Town, Boston, Jerusalem, travelling in the dark, fetid inside of Capt. Nicholls' leather breeches, emerging occasionally into the dazzling sunlight to discharge urine in some jostling public place. I thought also of all the things it had touched, all the molecules, of Capt. Nicholls' exploring hands on lonely unrequited nights at sea, the sweating walls of cunts of young girls and old whores. Their molecules must still exist today, a fine dust blowing from Cheapside to Leicestershire. Who knows how long it might have lasted in its glass jar. I began to clear up the mess. I brought the rubbish bucket in from the kitchen. I swept and picked up all the glass I could find and swabbed up the formaldehyde. Then, holding him by just one end, I tried to ease Capt. Nicholls onto a sheet of newspaper. My stomach heaved as the foreskin began to come away in my fingers. Finally, with my eyes closed I succeeded, and wrapping him carefully in the newspaper, I carried him into the garden and buried him under the geraniums. All this time I tried to prevent my resentment towards Maisie filling my mind. I wanted to continue with M.'s story. Back in my chair I dabbed at a few spots of formaldehyde which had blotted the ink, and read on.

"FOR AS LONG as a minute the room was frozen, and with each successive second it appeared to freeze harder. The first to speak was Dr. Stanley Rose of Cambridge University who had much to lose by Hunter's plane without a surface. His reputation, which was very considerable, indeed, rested upon his 'Principles of Solid Geometry'.

"How dare you, sir. How dare you insult the dignity of this assembly with a worthless conjuror's trick." And bolstered by the rising murmur of concurrence behind him he added, "You should be ashamed, young man, thoroughly ashamed." With that the room erupted like a volcano. With the exception of young Goodman, and of the servants who still stood by with the refreshments, the whole room turned on Hunter and directed at him an insensible babble of denunciation, invective and threat. Some thumped their fists on the table in their fury, others waived their clenched fists. One very frail German gentlemen fell to the floor in an apoplexy and had to be helped to a chair. And there stood Hunter, firm and

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outwardly unmoved, his head inclined slightly to one side, his fingers resting lightly on the surface of the long polished table. That such an uproar should follow a worthless conjuror's trick clearly demonstrated the extent of the underlying unease, and Hunter surely appreciated this. Raising his hand and the company falling suddenly silent once more he said,

" 'Gentlemen, your concern is understandable and I will effect another proof, the ultimate proof.' This said he sat down and removed his shoes, stood up and removed his jacket and then called for a volunteer to assist him at which Goodman came forward. Hunter strode through the crowd to a couch which stood along one of the walls and while he settled himself upon it he told the mystified Goodman that when he returned to England he should take with him Hunter's papers and keep them there until he came to collect them. When the mathematicians had gathered round the couch Hunter rolled onto his stomach and clasped his hands behind his back in a strange posture to fashion a hoop with his arms. He asked Goodman to hold his arms in that position for him, and rolled on his side where he began a number of strenuous jerking movements which enabled him to pass one of his feet through the hoop. He asked his assistant to turn him on his other side where he performed the same movements again and succeeded in passing his other foot between his arms, and at the same time bent his trunk in such a way that his head was able to pass through the hoop in the opposite direction to his feet. With the help of his assistant he began to pass his legs and head past each other through the hoop made by his arms. It was then that the distinguished assembly vented, as one man, a single yelp of utter incredulity. Hunter was beginning to disappear, and now, as his legs and head passed through his arms with greater facility, seemed even to be drawn through by some invisible power, he was almost gone. And now. . .he was gone, quite gone, and nothing remained."

M.'s STORY put my great grandfather in a frenzy of excitement. In his diary that night he recorded how he tried "to prevail upon my guest to send for the papers upon the instant" even though it was by now two o'clock in the morning. M., however, was more sceptical about the whole thing. "Americans," he told my great grandfather, "often indulge in fantastic tales." But he agreed to bring along the papers the following day. As it turned out M. did not dine with my great grandfather that night because of another engagement, but he called round in the late afternoon with the papers. Before he left he told my great grandfather he had

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been through them a number of times and "there was no sense to be had out of them." He did not realize then how much he was underestimating my great grandfather as an amateur mathematician. Over a glass of sherry in front of the drawing room fire the two men arranged to dine together again at the end of the week, on Saturday. For the next three days my great grandfather hardly paused from his reading of Hunter's theorems to eat or sleep. The diary is full of nothing else. The pages are covered with scribbles, diagrams and symbols. It seems that Hunter had to devise a new set of symbols, virtually a whole new language, to express his ideas. By the end of the second day my great grandfather had made his first breakthrough. At the bottom of a page of mathematical scribble he wrote, "dimensionality is a function of consciousness." Turning to the entry for the next day I read the words, "It disappeared in my hands." He had re-established the plane without a surface. And there, spread out in front of me were step by step instructions on how to fold the piece of paper. Turning the next page I suddenly understood the mystery of M.'s disappearance. Undoubtedly encouraged by my great grandfather he had taken part that evening in a scientific experiment, probably in a spirit of great scepticism. For here my great grandfather had drawn a series of small sketches illustrating what at first glance looked like yoga positions. Clearly they were the secret of Hunter's disappearing act.

MY HANDS WERE trembling as I cleared a space on my desk. I selected a clean sheet of typing paper and laid it in front of me. I fetched a razor blade from the bathroom. I rumaged in a drawer and found an old compass, sharpened a pencil and fitted it in. I searched through the house till I found an accurate steel ruler I had once used for fitting window panes, and then I was ready. First I had to cut the paper to size. The piece that Hunter had so casually picked up from the table had obviously been carefully prepared beforehand. The length of the sides had to express a specific ratio. Using the compass I found the centre of the paper and through this point I drew a line parallel to one of the sides and continued it right to the edge. Then I had to construct a rectangle whose measurements bore a particular relation to those of the sides of the paper. The centre of this rectangle occurred on the line in such a way as to dissect it by the Golden Mean. From the top of this rectangle I drew intersecting arcs, again of specified proportionate radii. This operation was repeated at the lower end of the rectangle, and when the two points of intersection were joined I had the line of incision. Then I started work on the folding lines.

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Each line seemed to express, in its length, angle of incline and point of intersection with other lines, some mysterious inner harmony of numbers. As I intersected arcs, drew lines and made folds I felt I was blindly operating a system of the highest, most terrifying form of knowledge, the mathematics of the Absolute. By the time I had made the final fold the piece of paper was the shape of a geometric flower with three concentric rings arranged round the incision at the centre. There was something so tranquil and perfect about this design, something so remote and compelling that as I stared into it I felt myself going into a light trance and my mind becoming clear and inactive. I shook my head and glanced away. It was time now to turn the flower in on itself and pull it through the incision. This was a delicate operation and now my hands were trembling again. Only by staring into the centre of the design could I calm myself. With my thumbs I began to push the sides of the paper flower towards the centre, and as I did so I felt a numbness settle over the back of my skull. I pushed a little further, the paper glowed whiter for an instant and then it *seemed* to disappear. I say seemed because at first I could not be sure whether I could feel it still in my hands and not see it, or see it but not feel it, or whether I could sense it had disappeared while its external properties remained. The numbness had spread right across my head and shoulders. My senses seemed inadequate to grasp what was happening. "Dimensionality is a function of consciousness" I thought. I brought my hands together and there was nothing between them, but even when I opened them again and saw nothing I could not be sure the paper flower had completely gone. An impression remained, an after image not on the retina but in the mind itself. Just then the door opened behind me and Maisie said,

"What are you doing?"

I RETURNED as if from a dream to the room and to the faint smell of formaldehyde. It was a long, long time ago now, the destruction of Capt. Nicholls, but the smell revived my resentment which spread through me like the numbness. Maisie slouched in the doorway muffled in a thick coat and woollen scarf. She seemed a long way off, and as I looked at her my resentment merged into a familiar weariness of our marriage. I thought, Why did she break the glass? Because she wanted to make love? Because she wanted a penis? Because she was jealous of my work, and wanted to smash the connection I had with my great grandfather's life?

"Why did you do it?" I said out loud, involuntarily. Maisie snorted. She had opened the door and found me hunched over my

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table staring at my hands.

"Have you been sitting there all afternoon," she asked, "thinking about *that*?" She giggled. "What happened to it anyway? Did you suck it off?"

"I buried it," I said, "under the geraniums." She came into the room a little way and said in a serious tone,

"I'm sorry about that, I really am. I just did it before I knew what was happening. Do you forgive me?"

I hesitated and then, because my weariness had blossomed into a sudden resolution, I said,

"Yes, of course I forgive you. It was only a prick in a pickle," and we both laughed. Maisie came over to me and kissed me, and I returned the kiss, prising her lips with my tongue.

"Are you hungry?" she said when we were done with kissing. "Shall I make some supper?"

"Yes," I said. "I would love that." Maisie kissed me on the top of my head and left the room while I turned back to my studies, resolving to be as kind as I possibly could to Maisie that evening.

LATER WE SAT in the kitchen eating the meal Maisie had cooked and getting mildly drunk on a bottle of wine. We smoked a joint, the first one we had had together in a very long time. Maisie told me how she was going to get a job with the Forestry Commission planting trees in Scotland next summer. And I told Maisie about the conversation M. and my great grandfather had had about *a posteriori*, and about my great grandfather's theory that there could not be more than the prime number seventeen positions for making love. We both laughed and Maisie squeezed my hand, and love-making hung in the air between us, in the warm fug of the kitchen. Then we put our coats on and went for a walk. It was almost a full moon. We walked along the main road which runs outside our house and then turned down a narrow street of tightly packed houses with immaculate and minute front gardens. We did not talk much, but our arms were linked and Maisie told me how very stoned and happy she was. We came to a small park which was locked and we stood outside the gates looking up at the moon through the leafless branches. When we came home Maisie took a leisurely hot bath while I browsed in my study, checking on a few details. Our bedroom is a warm, comfortable room, luxurious in its way. The bed is seven foot by eight and I made it myself in the first year of our marriage. Maisie made the sheets, dyed them a deep, rich blue and embroidered the pillow cases. The only light in the room shone through a rough old goatskin lampshade Maisie bought from a man who came to the door. It was a long time since I had taken an interest in the bed-

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room. We lay side by side in the tangle of sheets and rugs, Maisie voluptuous and drowsy after her bath and stretched full out, and I propped up on my elbow. Maisie said sleepily,

"I was walking along the river this afternoon. The trees are beautiful now, the oaks, the elms . . . there are two copper beeches about a mile past the footbridge. You should see them now. . . .ahh that feels good." I had eased her onto her belly and was caressing her back as she spoke. "There are blackberries, the biggest ones I've ever seen, growing all along the path, and elderberries too. I'm going to make some wine this autumn . . ." I leaned over her and kissed the nape of her neck and brought her arms behind her back. She liked to be manipulated in this way and she submitted warmly. "And the river is really still," she was saying. "You know, reflecting the trees, and the leaves are dropping into the river. Before the winter comes we should go there together, by the river, in the leaves. I found this little place. No one goes there . . ." Holding Maisie's arms in position with one hand I worked her legs towards the 'hoop' with the other. ". . . I sat in this place for half an hour without moving, like a tree. I saw a water rat running along the opposite bank and different kinds of ducks landing on the river and taking off. I heard these plopping noises in the river but I didn't know what they were, and I saw two orange butterflies, they almost came on my hand." When I had her legs in place Maisie said, "Position number eighteen," and we both laughed softly. "Let's go there tomorrow, to the river," said Maisie as I carefully eased her head towards her arms. "Careful, careful—that hurts!" she suddenly shouted and tried to struggle. But it was too late now. Her head and legs were in place in the hoop of her arms and I was beginning to push them through, past each other. "What's happening?" cried Maisie. Now the positioning of her limbs expressed breathtaking beauty, the nobility of the human form and, as in the paper flower, there was a fascinating power in its symetry. I felt the trance coming on again and the numbness settling over the back of my head. As I drew her arms and legs through Maisie appeared to turn in on herself like a sock. "Oh God," she sighed, "What's happening?" and her voice sounded very far away. Then she was gone . . . and not gone. Her voice was quite tiny, "What's happening?" and all that remained was the echo of her question above the deep blue sheets.

—IAN MCEWAN

DON'T MISS THE SWORD & SORCERY ANNUAL
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A CONAN THE CIMMERIAN thriller, THE QUEEN OF THE BLACK COAST, by ROBERT E. HOWARD. Also stories by FRITZ LEIBER (Fafhrd and the Mouser), JOHN JAKES (Brak the Barbarian), MICHAEL MOORCOCK, URSULA K. LEGUIN, ROBERT ARTHUR, and L. SPRAGUE DE CAMP by SAM MOSKOWITZ (Sword & Satire).

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ASYLUM IN THE CONCRETE

Alpajpuri's first-published story was "The Wind She Does Fly Wild" in the August, 1973, issue of our companion publication, AMAZING SF. *He returns with a story of which he says, "The science-fictional elements are even more subtle than those in my last story, but that's what I'm working toward: expressing ideas by writing* around *them instead of stating them blatantly. . ."*

ALPAJPURI

BREATHLESS MARA PAUSED on death's wet lip, her back slender to the dunes. From where the sun was firmly thumbtacked to the roof of sky, a hemisphere of blue curved down all around to bang the chipped jade tabletop that stretched out from the shore. The sky, like her mind, was mottled with anaemic dreams. In the distant south a slow-motion nightmare boiled and brewed, its rising wind casting handfuls of gulls shrieking into the air. At her toes, sea slid into sand slid into sea.

Here I balance on the brink of real—(Shapes of muscles shifted beneath brown gooseflesh and sprinkled hairs as she poised in wet sand)—*Watch me topple off*—

The ocean licked its salty lips, flicked out a foam-flecked tongue to tickle her instep and she danced away, allowing the momentum to start her walking again. Step, step, down the narrow corridor between pale yellow sand cluttered with sea debris and the graygreen churning of frigid salinity. Step, step, damp sand squishing up between toes, step between dune grasses and gulls and the chill sucking sounds of the sea.

The beach held violence at arm's length—fifty yards out, breakers rolled like dirty cotton, lashed to tears by the wind and bellowing their pain in continuous thunder. From that scene of torture to the beach where she walked, the surf sent only passive emissaries, overlapping slabs of sea like thin shelves sliding out to deliver their whispers of agony to the drowned sands.

The cold air made her shoulders tremble toward her cheeks. There had been a large wooden sign back there, on the road from the deserted fishing town to the

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beach. DANGER! its painted letters peeled and pealed, SWIMMING IN THE EBB TIDE IS SUICIDE.

How alluring! She had no idea the ocean advertised.

But now the tide was coming in:

A sudden chill splashed her ankles and she ran backwards, half laughing, to fall in the cool thickness of sand at his knees. They both flinched: his eyes filled with horror, then wetness, then void; her catsmouth smile returned and died.

A man. Not much older. Brown sweatshirt and faded jeans. His clothing, his hair, the creases of his skin, were slated with windblown sand. *Sandman*, she named him. *Pretty*. His cheekbones stood up and out from his narrow, sunbeat face. Trimmed beard, grey eyes with squinty wrinkles, a thick shock of tired hair grasped back with a ragged thong. He looked so calm, balanced there, crosslegged atop a driftlog half sucked into greedy sand. The beach puckered to receive its angled shaft.

But he was looking past her now, to the sea.

Sandman I'm so alone won't you come love me live with me die with me she said in her head but the breeze just tugged wordlessly at her black brillo hair, the waves just sucked at soggy sand. She felt a century of wave crash down between them then. He would just say—

"Go away."

A hundred yards down the beach a clique of gulls rose flappingly, on cue, to perform their babycry calligraphy in the sky before settling farther on. Mara looked back at the sandman.

"Now," he croaked. His eyes flicked icicles into her brain.

She shrugged and stood, hugging bare breasts, and shuffled off through the thick, coldblooded sand toward the waves. And turned suddenly to sit on the other end of the driftlog, just where it sank into the beach. Its weathered corrugations textured her ass. "I didn't expect to find anyone here," she began, and searched the fissures of his face for a trace of leaking secrets. "That town is a living graveyard," and nodded past the dunes. "Where did everybody—"

But his face was doing something behind its skin, a little like sorrow, a little like fear. "Gone," he said finally.

"But where?"

He was silent.

"I think you know . . ."

And then he let his eyelids fall against those beautiful, stark cheeks.

Mara rolled her tonguetip across a lip. "Have you ever suicided?"

The eyes came open abruptly.

"I have," she said, and swivelled to lie with her spine against the driftlog, hands clasped behind her head and toes working into sand like coffee into cream. "Innumerable times." She arched her

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neck to smile back at him, upside-down, and settled again. She could feel the breeze sift its luxurious, cool fingers through the black mossy patch beyond her belly. "In all, I'd say my most gratifying suicide was when I was fifteen and lived with my stepfather in Seattle. He had an apartment on the twenty-ninth floor. Weekends I used to just sit and stare out the window at the rain. I *love* rain. Do you?"

She waited, watching clouds bleed across the sun. Shivered. "I do. It's so *large*, I mean, it rains and rains and the whole world dies and rots away, and new things grow. It's like life and death in the same steady stream. Except in Seattle where everything is already dead. Especially the people. They're afraid of the rain because they know it will rot them away. They're afraid to grow new again, or maybe they just don't see. So they build more scrapers and domes out of dead wood and concrete and plastic and glass to keep out the death, keep out the rain, keep out the life. If only they lived in forests! I love the forest—I mean I've never lived in one but I know it would be—I mean they wouldn't have to be afraid, because they'd see there isn't any difference between death and life. Maybe then they'd understand. But they don't, and that's what's killing them." A giggle from the hip ricocheted off her backbone and lodged in one eye.

She felt him shift his weight behind her, heard that tired, tired voice say, "I have."

"What? Suicided? Or understood?"

" . . . Lived in the forest. For years."

"God! Really? To commune with the rain?"

(He shook his head.) "To keep people out of . . . range."

"Of what?"

He said nothing; she couldn't identify the sound he made. "Anyway," she said, "finally one day I unlatched the window and stepped out into the rain. Didn't *jump*—that's for *them*. I just calmly stepped out like you'd step into a closet or out of your clothes. The world is like a closet, with cold walls pressing in and a cold ceiling pushing down. Only it doesn't have a floor. I fell and fell." She sat up and turned to grin, then her eyebrows met. "Hey, you okay?"

Slowly he lifted his face from his hands and looked wetly away. "Why did you come here?" he said, almost too softly. "Why did you come—to torment me?"

"*Torment* you—Christ, no!" She laughed. "I came here to die!"

For one horrible instant she thought he was going to scream, but then she saw the pleading glisten from his wide grey eyes. Carefully she got to her feet and walked away.

FANS OF SEAWATER laced with rime spread open at her feet,

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sizzling as they soaked into the earth of packed, ground shell. In patient rhythm the mother geisha swept them back in, each wave rippling the wet sand as it passed in turbulence. Mara crouched to watch as the ripples in the sand tripped up the next waterwave and made it churn, molding other ripples which rippled other waves. Mutually sculpting semi-fluids: where did she fit in?

Crushing the sandripples with her toes she sloshed further out till the surging waves were a persistent tug at her thighs, pressing her back and sucking her in. Two steps backward, three steps in—a larger wave broke like cream on her chocolate belly, spraying her face and stinging her eyes. She had to blink for sight.

She heard the splashing behind her just before she heard his voice, and turned to see the sandman crashing toward her through the waterfans. His face froze hers—his eyes swept up and back with alarm, nostrils flared, the mouth hanging open on a vacant pit of fear. Stringy muscles stretched his cheeks as he yelled hoarsely over the roar, scrambling through shallow surf and flailing arms.

She started toward him, and saw the mouth go slack, the eyes soar—

She caught him before he hit the water, sank under his weight with his face against her neck. Brine surged bitter against their chests. She wound her arms around him and hauled him staggering back onto the beach.

He collapsed near the driftlog, eyelids fluttering, arms and fingers dripping the afternoon light. His mouth screwed up to form shapes, formed others. She was trembling too. The brimming blackness had now swallowed a third of the sky.

"You look like death," said Mara.

The sandman found some voice. "I thought, I thought, you were going to, just walk right in! Just like they did, just walk right in! Just keep on going and never come out!"

"Don't!" She wiped wet streaks of hair from his forehead, then said gently, "What I do with my own life is my own affair. It's the only thing I *do* control—"

"No!" He sobbed. "Not here! Not around me."

She sat back on her heels, sighing to find a handhold in the swim of his mind. Finally she said, "You're weak."

"I know, I haven't eaten in three days," said the sandman. (*That wasn't what I* . . . but she let him go on.) "Haven't slept. Haven't *moved*, not since—"

"Since what?"

He drew hard on his lungs. "Since they walked right in! Just walked right in, and never came out!"

"*What?* Who?"

His face cracked and shattered in wrinkles. "There was nothing I could do! They followed my mind!

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How can you change what you feel?"

"If you feel at all," Mara said quietly, "you're better off than me."

"No!" He rolled away. "You don't understand. They never understand."

"Don't be a child!"

"Don't be a child," he mimicked.

"So what *do* you feel?"

"Death! I feel death!" His face was vicious. "I came to this beach to drown myself in the sea. Oh God—" Anguish washed through the gutters of his face. "I came here to die."

"Why?"

He pursed his lips. "You wouldn't comprehend."

Mara made a disgusted sound. "Don't give me that shit! You know I came here for that too."

Facial muscles jerked. "And you think that was your own decision, don't you?"

Her fist struck with a thud and a short spray of sand. "Of course it was! I've been planning this for weeks! Just as soon as I could break out, I knew where I'd come and what I'd do."

"My turn to ask why."

"Because I can't *feel* anyone! Because I can't feel! I'm cut off from everything by a wall of fog a million miles thick! I'm sick of it, man, I'm getting out!"

He basked in her anger. "How trite."

"So what's your cosmic all-important reason for dying?"

He paused. "I'm affective."

"I said you looked sick. Ever see a doctor?"

He snorted. "I told you, you wouldn't understand. Telepathic broadcast doesn't mean shit to a tree . . ."

She tilted her head in question, then laid fingers on his arm. "Try me—"

"*No*!" He lurched away, crawled across sand to clutch the silent driftlog. His eyes went to slits. She felt something wet and cold wiggle up the nape of her neck. "I said," he said, almost in control, "I'm affective, *Affective*. With an A."

She shrugged her lips, her eyes.

"I affect people," he said through tight teeth. "I make them feel the way I feel."

She used her shoulders this time.

"Ah, what's the use!" His tongue flickered pink, withdrew. "Tell me, what do you feel? Right now?"

"Right now?" Her eyebrows flew, her eyes followed. "Not much. I'm cold. I'm tired. Sort of happy, sort of sad. I'm going to die soon. Not much else."

Bewilderment. It showed. "How about now?" He clenched his eyes, his lips, his hands and *squeezed*.

She waited to shrug till he opened his eyes.

A fistful of expressions struck him hard across the face. "You mean to tell me, you didn't feel fear? You didn't feel ugly death?

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You didn't feel like the whole world of mindless, stupid puppets is black and sick?" His eyes were wide, staring right at her, didn't see her. "You mean you didn't *feel* it?"

She shivered, shook sea from her hair, mumbled, "Brother, I don't need you for that . . ."

But he was already walking away, saying, "Free?" The word sounded strange in his mouth; he rolled it over like a rock in a swamp. "You mean to say I'm really *free*? Oh God, oh God, I've got to make sure—"

But now she could only hear the wind, whistling around the dunes it had built up over years and months and days. Mutually sculpting semifluids: where did she fit in? She watched him stumble off down the beach and break into a careening run, till she could barely make out the jiggle of his legs in the distance and then not at all.

THE TOWN hung open like an abandoned face. Screen doors and storm shutters clattered in the rising wind, shadows hung back in the hollows of homes to watch with silent emnity. Two late-model cars and a battered green pickup squatted empty in the middle of the pitted street, still idling where they had been left beneath the rolling skyscape of blacks and greys. The wind stank of fish and stagnant sea. Mara ran down the weathered asphalt, chunks of gravel biting her feet, past the empty coffeeshop, the darkened post office, the silent gas station with its single pump. From somewhere came the tinny traces of an AM radio blatting to no one; to her left a TV still threw its ghastly blue flicker out an open door.

She stopped a moment to regard the shoes, the coat, the panties, the green pajama uniform that still lay strewn across the intersection where she had dropped them, tried to remember, then tried to forget—

She heard a baby cry, swung around and spotted the sandman immediately, stone still in the doorway of a greybrown house. She approached at a walk, saw the wind whip free wisps of hair about his head. Then he entered into shadow. The baby stopped. She stopped. Then ran.

At the doorsill she clung, suppressing her breath, realizing he was still unaware she had followed. He was moving slowly across green linoleum in dusklight. The only sounds were the wind running rampant through the streets, the creaking of wood, the whispers of fir. The crib stood quiet against the far wall beneath a framed painting of rock-smashed waves, they too frozen in the clutch of the moment. Lightning-cold quicksilver trickled up her scalp.

The sandman stood at the brim of the crib unmoving, then swelled with one huge breath, folded his arms and *squeezed*. The baby

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screamed, high and long, a scream that swelled and shattered in baby's throat, ending in a low human sob that must have come from the sandman. His knees gave way and he sank to the floor. The baby sucked breath and squalled. The sea crashed against rocks on the wall. The sandman's head shuddered at the neck and fell, his forehead knocked the floor and he toppled to his side, and together with the baby he cried and cried.

Mara found a kitchen knife and gave them release.

NAKED SHE STRUGGLED against the battering gale that whipped night and salt and sand in her eyes, until she reached the cold waves and stepped, as calmly as you'd step into a closet or out of your clothes, past the pale bloated corpses washed up by the storm and into the fury of churning dreams, where she finally breathed deeply and free.

—ALPAJPURI

ON SALE IN MARCH AMAZING — Dec. 31st

The ALL NEW & COMPLETE issue featuring SECOND CREATION by GORDON EKLUND. Also, THAT'S THE SPIRIT by HORACE L. GOLD, GOOD SERVANTS ARE HARD TO FIND THESE DAYS, by GRANT CARRINGTON, WHEN TWO OR THREE ARE GATHERED by C. L. GRANT, THEY'VE GOT SOME HUNGRY WOMAN THERE . . . by P. G. WYAL, A CREATURE OF ACCIDENT by THOMAS F. MONTELEONE, and many new features.

ON SALE NOW IN DECEMBER AMAZING

THE ALL NEW & COMPLETE issue featuring, THE ARAQNID WINDOW by CHARLES L. HARNESS. Also, RUN TO STARLIGHT by GEORGE R. R. MARTIN, ATTACHMENT by PHYLLIS EISENSTEIN, THE DECAYED LEG BONE by ROBERT F. YOUNG, AN OFFER OF OBLIVION by BRIAN N. STABLEFORD, THE SPIRIT OF SEVENTY-SIX by DAVE SKAL, HAPPY NEW YEAR, HAL, by NEIL BARRETT, JR. and WHY CIVILIZATION?, by GREGORY BENFORD, AN ISSUE YOU SHOULD NOT MISS.

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THE RETURN OF CAPTAIN NUCLEUS

In our March, 1974, issue Gary Romeo suggested, "If you must have science-fiction, why don't you print some good stories. The ones about how Captain Nucleus beat a half-dozen BEMS *for breakfast and saved Neptune and Venus for lunch and dinner. I like that kind of* SF." *Bruce Arthurs read Gary's letter, and, moved deeply by his plea, has risen to the challenge . . . sort of . . .*

BRUCE D. ARTHURS

ILLUSTRATED by JOE STATON

I

SHIFTING THE SPACEDRIVE into high gear, Captain Nucleus sped into the depths of space. His ever present sidekick, Ugoo the Martian, was busy also, mopping up the greenish slime that was all that remained of the half-dozen Venusian BEMS who had tried to hijack the ship that morning.

The space-radio beeped. Ugoo reached out with one of his auxiliary arms and switched on the speaker.

"Calling Captain Nucleus! Calling Captain Nucleus! Emergency! Emergency! Come in, Captain Nucleus!"

"Now what?" the rugged-looking, spacetanned hero of the spaceways asked in exasperation. He'd hardly had time for a cup of coffee so far that day. Being the greatest hero of the solar system and savior of Earth uncountable times sometimes got to be a pain. He pushed in the transmit button. "Hello, Captain Nucleus here. What's the trouble today?"

The wavering voice of an old man came over the speaker. "Nuke, is that you? This is General Smasher. We've been trying to get ahold of you for hours!"

"Sure, Smash, it's me. What's going on? Humped any Plutonians lately?" Cpatain Nucleus was surely the only man alive who could have made such a remark to the commander of the entire Space Forces and gotten away with it. General Smasher, of course, owed his life to Captain Nucleus, not once but a dozen times. The general often said that he'd gladly lay down his life for Captain Nucleus, who at times

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considered accepting the offer. General Smasher was a fool, after all; else why would he have had anything to do with the old man were it not for the memory of his daughter, Eleena Smasher.

Ah, Eleena! Captain Nucleus remembered their first meeting well. Eleena had been kidnapped by a Martian of lustful intent, and Nucleus had begun his pursuit upon hearing the size of the reward offered. He had burst into the heavily defended fortress and rayed the Martian just as the creature, after several weeks of study and hypothesis, had figured which things went where and was preparing to consummate the awful deed.

Ah, the many adventures they had shared over the next few years! The Slime Pits of Pluto, the Turtle Men of Ganymede, the Carnivorous Cockroaches of Callisto, the Ten-Tentacled Terror of the Lunar Ice Caverns, the Guided Tour of Brooklyn, and the dozens of other horrifying and incredible escapades!

And then, that fateful day, when Eleena had been kidnapped for the last time, and Captain Nucleus had blasted a vengeful path across the Solar System in his search for her. To no avail. Though he had wiped out over half the Criminal's League in his search, not one could or would give him the information he wanted. Eleena had never been seen again. That had been six years ago.

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Captain Nucleus' attention was brought back to the present by the voice coming over the speaker. "Well, Nuke, I hate to admit this, but we're really in a mess down here. The enlisted ranks have all revolted! All over the Solar System, officers have been beaten, imprisoned, and lynched in sudden attacks! The Space Fleet is in chaos and all our defense posts are abandoned! I don't need to tell you that if the situation doesn't return to normal as soon as possible, Earth will fall into the hands of scum like Jovians, Titanians, and the remnants of the Criminal's League! Right now, I and the few surviving officers are holed up in the Communications Room of Space Forces Headquarters, but there's a mob outside trying their damnedest to get at us, Nuke, and I don't know how long we can hold out. It sure would be appreciated if you could blast over here and maybe get us out, like you did that time in the Martian Sand Ocean, remember?"

Captain Nucleus thought hard for a moment. "Well, Smash," he finally replied, "I've been thinking about the priorities of this situation, and . . . well, like you said, the Earth might be overrun any minute, and it'll take all possible speed to be able to stop that from happening. Now, the most likely invasion force would come from Mars, since that's the closest, and I'll have to head there pretty fast to head off any invasion force, so. . . ." He let his voice trail off.

The radio speaker stayed silent for the next moment or two. Finally, the old man's shocked voice came back on again. "*What*? Nuke, do you realize what you're saying? Nuke, you can't just leave us here! Damn it, boy, it's your *duty* . . ."

"Well, gee whiz, Smash, you always told me that in the heat of battle, it's sometimes necessary to let an individual die in order to win a battle, and it seems to me that *you* . . ."

"*Nuke*! Please, Nuke, this is General Smasher talking! Remember me? I'm the father of your fiancee; I'm the guy who talked the government into giving you that warehouse full of medals; I gave you tips on the stock market; I showed you how to improve your golf game; I. . . ."

"I *will* remember you, Smash, with great fondness, believe me. I wish there was some other way, but *c'est la guerre*, you know. Tis a far, far better thing you do, than you have ev. . . ."

"*Nuuuuuuuukkkke!!* Goddamn it, you son of a bitch! You owe me this! I let you shack up with my daughter for years, dammit, so I could be sure of having you available to get me out of situations like this! Do you hear that noise, Nuke? They're breaking down the doors, Nuke. We're out of ammo here, Nuke. They're gonna kill us, Nuke. You can't let that happen, Nuke. You hear me, Nuke?

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Nuke? Nuke, are you still there? Nuke, come in, Nuke! *Nuke! They're breaking in, Nuke! They're. . .*" The speaker suddenly went dead, as the sinister sound of atomic pistols was heard.

"The thpeakerth gone dead, boththh," lisped Ugoo.

"And so has General Thmasher, err, Smasher. Set course for Mars, Ugoo, with all possible speed."

II.

ON THE Greater Plain of Mars, a vast armada of battlecruisers, destroyers, and other heavily armed vessels of destruction were preparing to launch themselves on a mission of invasion and pillage. Over the red sands, thousands of men and vehicles moved, fueling, loading, and manning the awesome fleet. The men were the most hardened and vicious scum of the worst hell-holes of all the planets.

Suddenly and swiftly, a small scoutship flashed down thru the atmosphere and landed amongst the ships before a hand had been able to raise against it. The nearest man to the ship saw the ship's insignia of crossed comets and let out a scream of fear: "*It's Captain Nucleus! Run for your lives!*"

Some ran. But others, their fear overpowered by greed and sheer evil, did not turn tail in the face of this legendary danger. Within half a minute, every blaster, every heat ray, every atomic cannon, every gun in the entire fleet was trained upon that lone scoutship. Within the next half a minute, hundreds of men surrounded the ship, small arms and portable cannon at the ready, their faces grim and determined.

They waited.

And waited.

Finally, after what seemed hours, though it was only minutes, the airlock door of the scoutship slowly began to open. And there, out in the open, hands poised confidently on hips, stood the man whom every individual gathered round the scoutship had dreamed of killing.

"It's him. It's Captain Nucleus. It's really him," one man whispered in awe.

"I wonder if I could get his autograph before we kill him?" wondered another.

As Captain Nucleus stood there silently, making no move towards his sidearms, the criminal army began to raise their weapons towards him. Their fingers tightened on the deadly triggers.

"*Wait!*" came a lone cry. "Look! Look at his shoulders and sleeves!"

They looked. And they saw. They saw that the captain's bars had been removed from the shoulders of Captain Nucleus' uniform. Instead, on the sleeves had been sewn the insignia of a common sergeant!

Nucleus looked out over the awestruck, staring crowd. Finally,

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with a deep, commanding voice, he spoke. "Sorry to keep you men waiting, I had to wait until Ugoo finished sewing on my new rank." The army still stared silently at the incredible sight. "Well? Hadn't you guys better be on your way?"

The spell broke, as the men realized just what it was they had been witness to. An awesome cheer rang out from thousands of lips. Hats, guns, articles of clothing were tossed into the air from sheer glee. Men and weaponry poured onto the ships of the armada. With thunderous roars, the ships blasted into space, carrying their savage cargo towards a defenseless Earth.

Captain Nucleus had sold out!

III.

In his fifty square mile estate on the shore of the Martian Sand Ocean, Sergeant Nucleus was practicing his golf drive on the General Smasher Memorial Golf Course. He still had a bad tendency to hook his shots into the Sand Ocean, which he usually referred to as "that god *damned* sandtrap." He looked up from the ball as a helicopter flew overhead and landed on the mansion rooftop helipad.

"Hmm. The Criminal's League must be delivering my monthly payoff a little early. Here, Ugoo, take my iron like a good caddie. And police up the course a bit while I go see my visitors, will you? The cigarette butts have been getting knee deep around here lately."

His visitor, Sergeant Nucleus discovered, was Ooglek, the Jovian who had been one of the main masterminds behind the invasion of Earth. Some people claimed he had been the true mastermind, the unknown, mystery-shrouded figure who had triggered the enlisted revolt and upset the course of history from here on. But that was only a guess, and one that Ooglek himself denied. As usual, Ooglek was carrying with him a large briefcase stuffed with Martian credits, Venusian stocks, Jovian gems, Callistan cheeses, and other valuable and priceless objects. Sergeant Nucleus often spent hours counting and admiring them in the underground vaults.

"Hi ya, Oog. How's things going? Can I get you anything to drink?"

"A glass of formaldehyde would be fine. Make it a small one, though; I'm driving. Things are really going great, Sarge. When you turned your coat, the Earth was completely demoralized and we took over the planet with hardly a shot fired. Now that we've put the Earth onto a slave-based economy, we're making money hand over tentacle. Why, we're making so much, your payoffs hardly make a dent in the Petty Cash drawer."

"Glad to hear it, glad to hear it. Oh jeez, but I wish I'd decided to

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take up opportunism sooner; a little hedonism is good for the soul now and then. I was getting mighty tired of going around saving the Earth every few weeks, believe me, and never getting as much appreciation from it as I deserved. Maybe if the enlisted revolt had broken out sooner, I wouldn't have wasted so much of my life."

"That reminds me, Sarge, you've never expressed very much interest in how that revolt got started. I always thought that you'd be the one person who'd have an especial interest in something like that."

Sergeant Nucleus took another swallow of his drink and laughed. "That's the old Nucleus you're talking about, Oog, who'd be interested. For me, what do I care, except that I was able to take advantage of it? I have it made! I'll never have to work another day in my life, I can buy or rent any pleasure or vice available, and I'm even rich enough to have new ones invented especially for me! Why should I worry about the past?"

As if on cue, the chair Sergeant Nucleus had been sitting in extended its tentacles and clamped his arms and legs firmly. Another tentacle slid around his neck and jerked his head back.

"What the. . . ! A Cerian chairbeast! Ooglek, you son of a bitch, what is this, a goddamned doublecross?" Sergeant Nucleus heaved from side to side, trying to break the painful grip of the tentacles, but they only tightened further, choking him.

"Not quite a doublecross, Sarge," chortled Ooglek. "We've *always* had this in mind, right from the very beginning. And now, I'd like for you to meet an old friend of yours."

Sergeant Nucleus heard footsteps coming from behind him. A familiar figure came around and stood in front of him.

It was Eleena Smasher!

When he got over his initial shock and surprise, he was able to speak: "Eleena, baby! Long time no see! Where in hell have you been for so long? You don't know how I looked for you, babe! You could have at least droped a card. Man, it's good to see them big ti. . . ." Eleena's hand smashed across his face, drawing blood.

"Eleena, wha. . . ?" he asked in astonishment.

A furious scowl swept across Eleena's beautiful face. "You lousy son of a bitch! For years you treated me as if you owned me! Well, now the tables are turned! I own *you*, you bastard, and I'm going to make sure you don't forget it!"

"Eleena, I don't understand what you're saying. I never treated you badly. It was *me* who rescued you from that sex-crazed Martian, remember? It was me who showed you what a real man was like!"

"A real man? *Hah!* Why, Ooglek here is ten times the sex part-

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ner you were! And don't tell *me* you're a real man! Don't you think I know what *really* went on in the map room when you said you were examining navigation charts with Ugoo? Don't you think I ever saw you feeling that extraterrestrial faggot's pseudopods under the dinner table? Don't give me that crap, you refugee from a closet! Yeh, and all that garbage about being the Greatest Hero in the Galaxy? Sublimation! You knew you weren't really a man, so you forced yourself to be a *hero* instead, and you took up all those little things you thought made you a hero: big muscles, a helpless female clinging to you, doing great deeds because of a 'sense of decency and fair play', all of that crap! But you couldn't keep it up, could you, because you *knew* what you really were, and so you turned your back on everything that you used to stand for. Isn't that right?"

Sergeant Nucleus sagged in his chair, as far as the tentacles allowed him to do so. She knew! His hidden shame had been exposed. He was losing everything. No longer the luxury and wealth he had become used to. No longer the respect and admiration the human race had used to feel for him. No longer any of those fantastic nights with Ugoo!

But still, deep within him, a spark of determination still lived on. He remembered back, back when the mere sight of him would cause criminals to throw down their guns and beg for mercy, back when children had been named after him, back when he had been the master force for law and order in the Solar System. The spark grew within him, flared, and burned brightly once again!

He spoke, and it was with the voice of old he spoke, the deep, commanding voice which had been the dread of wicked beings everywhere. "You may have me for now," he began, "but I will not remain your captive for long. Remember who you are talking to. You're talking to Captain Nucleus . . .

"Sergeant," corrected Ooglek.

"*Captain!* I am *Captain* Nucleus! The man you knew as Sergeant Nucleus, the turncoat, the traitor to his race, exists no more! Captain Nucleus has returned! Hero of the Spaceways! Savior of Worlds! Remember that no one, no matter how powerful or savage, has been able to defeat me! A hundred, no, a *thousand* times have I been in situations just like this, where escape appeared impossible, and always have I triumphed in the end! You cannot defeat me! My victory is as inevitable as a Law of Nature! I *will* escape from this chairbeast, I *will* defeat all of you, I *will* restore Justice and Democracy to the Solar System!" Ooglek shuddered and stepped back at the utterance of these statements.

"Except you'll never get the

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chance, this time." Eleena smiled coldly as she pulled a gun from her purse. "That was the mistake all your old enemies made, they let you live too long, and you always managed to escape and defeat them. But I lived with you for too long to make that same mistake." She put the gun to Captain Nucleus' forehead and pulled the hammer back.

"Wait!" he cried, making a desperate stall for time. "Aren't you at least going to tell me how this despicable plan of yours was devised?"

"I thought you said you weren't interested in that?" Ooglek said.

"I lied."

"It's all right, Oogie," cooed Eleena. Ooglek shuddered even more at the nickname. "One or two minutes more won't make that much difference, even when we're dealing with Captain Nucleus." She pulled the gun back.

Captain Nucleus heaved a mental sigh of relief. With his usual luck, one or two minutes would be all he needed. *If I tense my muscles*, he thought, *then suddenly let them go slack, the chairbeast might be caught by surprise and I'd be able to break its grip.*

"First of all," Eleena began, "I was never kidnapped. I ran away from you because I couldn't stand the thought of you anymore. And I hid in a place where you never thought of looking; I joined the Space Navy! And I didn't even use an assumed name! All you had to do was run a simple computer check and you could have found me inside of a minute."

No good. The damned chairbeast is too strong. Maybe if I managed to tip the chair over, I could stun the beast and escape.

"Once in the Navy, I began to use a woman's most powerful weapon: my body. Slowly, at first, then with more speed, I began to spread dissension among the enlisted ranks. I'd tell them that they were all a lot better lovers than any officers I'd had. Obviously, I pointed out, that showed who was better fit to run things."

Shit, that's no good either. Even if I managed to tip the chair over, I couldn't do it fast enough to keep her from blowing my head off.

"Of course, I couldn't do it all myself. I recruited other military women into my campaign, and we sooned formed an elite corps of lovers, mistresses, and sex partners, able to get the enlisted men to do anything for us. The organization spread out into the other services, and eventually we controlled every enlisted man in the services. At the same time, I was in contact with the heads of the Criminal's League, who were quite pleased to copulate err, cooperate fully with me."

There's got to be a way some how. There's got to!

"Then, we struck. All the officers were quickly eliminated and Earth's defense system fell into chaos. As I'd expected and depended upon, you saw a chance

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to quit the life of a hero, so you turned traitor and joined with the Criminal's League, the winning side."

Hey. Wait a minute. What the heck am I worrying about? Since I can't escape from this chair, this is obviously going to be one of those situations where a platoon of Space Marines comes rushing in at the last minute, or her gun will backfire, or a stray meteorite will crash thru the roof and wipe both of them out. That sort of thing always happens in situations like this. Hell, I can just sit back and relax.

"You should know, though, that the only reason you're still alive right now is because of me. The heads of the League wanted to eliminate you right away, but I said no. I wanted to see you rolling in wealth. I wanted to see you think that you were going to live in luxury the rest of your life, and then I wanted to take all that away from you and let you see what a sucker and a fool you really are before I killed you. And I have," she said in satisfaction, raising the gun to his head again.

Hey, Marines, this is getting pretty close. "But how," he exclaimed, stalling for just a few more seconds, "*how* could you have been so sure your plan would succeed? There were so many places where it could have gone wrong." *Where are those damned Marines, they're cutting it too damned close!*

Eleena smiled and pressed the gun more firmly against his head. "Why, you old-fashioned idiot, with your one-man heroics, zooming around the system like some kind of moron superman. Did you really think you had even a chance against the conspiracy I started among naval women, making them into a new power to be reckoned with? Did you think you had any chance at all against the New Waves?"

Where's them fucking marines? Where's them fu. . . .

She pulled the trigger.

—BRUCE D. ARTHURS

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fantasy books

reviewed by Fritz Leiber

FROM ASGARD TO ELFLAND

HROLF KRAKI'S SAGA, by Poul Anderson, Ballantine, 1973, $1.25, 282 pp.

Norse mythology with its grim, laughing gods has been one of the continuous influences on my life, commencing toward the end of my first decade and now strengthening at the beginning of my seventh. So I naturally brightened at seeing this book's title and author. My anticipation was additionally whetted by Allan Mardon's magnificent wrap-around cover painting depicting doomed northmen in byries and iron skullcaps battling with great gray swords against wolf- and fiend-headed ogres, a huge gray boar, and violet-cloaked death himself shown against a background of black storm-clouds, dragon prows, an inciting valkyry, and an eerily-ringed green sun.

The book surpassed my expectations. From a minor Icelandic saga (minor because late in composition and lacking in style and logic) and scattered references elsewhere, Anderson has brilliantly reconstructed the whole cycle of myth and legend surrounding the Dark-Ages king who was the Danish Arthur, Leidhra on Zealand his Camelot. While his round table is principally occupied by twelve heroes, the sagas of the most important of whom make up the bulk of the book: Bjarki whose father was a woeful, loving were-bear cursed by a lascivious stepmother; Svipdag, a courteous heathen knight, son of Svip of the Second Sight; Hott (later Hjalti) and Vögg, bumpkins who became warriors of the highest courage—why, if this were ordinary sword and sorcery, there'd be enough plot for six books.

(And I have not even mentioned the women: fierce bitter Olof, patient strong Yrsa, fearless Sigridh, and the doom-carrying elf-child Skuld are all strongly realized although they lived in an age when women were chattels.)

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One must not carry the King Arthur analogy too far. This is not Christian stuff in content and little in telling. As Anderson says in his foreword, "Slaughter, slavery, robbery, rape, torture, heathen rites bloody or obscene, were parts of daily life." Hrolf Kraki himself is the child of father-daughter incest; his grandfather-father Helgi raped his (Hrolf's) maternal grandmother, thereby providing Hrolf with three quarters of his heredity and even us jaded moderns with some shock at least. Hrolf by comparison has an uncharged sexual life (two daughters by casual bed-mates) and perhaps consequentially a cool judgment which allows him to give the north a few bold bright years before the superstitious dark of the Sixth Century (that of Arthur and Beowulf also) closes in again.

Anderson handles the supernatural element impressively, as befits an outstanding sword-and-sorcery writer, yet also keeps it to a minimum and suggests alternate explanations where possible, as fits an even more notable science-fiction writer. (Berserkers may lessen blood-loss by biofeedback. The last word is of course mine—F.L.) The first half of the book has a minimum of eerie elements, concentrating rather on a vivid picturing of daily barbarian life. The second half brings in various magics, the Elven Folk of unearthly beauty, and finally the Norse gods themselves—but always in the light of modern knowledge: Thor, Frey, and Aegir are the true benign trinity; Odin not kindly all-father, but sinister chooser of the slain and leader of the wild valkyrie-hunt through the skies; by rejecting an ugly gift from Odin, Hrolf dooms his brave court to destruction at what may be called the Battle of Leidhra, which is the scene Mardon depicts so finely on the cover.

The language of the book demonstrates Anderson's vigor and resourcefulness. The effect is of dark, rushing storm shot with sunlight revealing saturated colors. The short Anglo-Saxon words come in gusts, good words though seldom used: not just troll, but niss, nicor, spook, drow; not only farm and field, but byre and croft and shaw; verbs like boil, roil, scud, surf, well. Other four-letter ones hit like hail. Hjalti explains why he hasn't brought his leman to Hrolf's Yule feast: "Here's no place to bang her, guests stacked like cordwood." ("Bang" may strike some as jarringly current. It does not me, though there's room for argument. To me, even such words as "smog," or "dig" or "Wow" as used by hippies, can be appropriate in the most far-off fantasy language. Curt words for curt concepts. Out of this nettle triteness, we pluck the flower truth. But it surely takes judgment! more than I sometimes have, I'm sure.—F.L.) But I also quoted Hjalti as an example of the Icelandic Epic Meter (the old

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long alliterative line) which frequently strengthens the prose of the book. This line (often, as here, minus its alliteration) is the line of which Longfellow's *Hiawatha* and the Finnish *Kalevala* and the "Double, double, toil and trouble" of the *Macbeth* witches are variously specialized examples. Its essence is two half lines separated by a pause and each having two stressed syllables (or sometimes three—Icelandic Speech Meter, distantly analogous to Classical Hexameter). But, unlike the stricter trochaic tetrameter, the number of unstressed syllables may vary. The result is a line that gives the effect of striding, or of successive ocean rollers striking a beach, which can be used (judiciously, of course) to good effect in some fantasy and particularly sword-and-sorcery prose. It helps give the saga of the Skjoldungs, as retold here by Poul Anderson on the good urging of Lin Carter and Mr. and Ms. Ballantine, a stature equal to those of the Nibelungs, Ynglings, and Pendragons—I mean King Arthur.

THE CRYSTAL GRYPHONE, by Andre Norton, DAW, 1972, 95¢, 192 pp.

Andre Norton began her remarkable writing career with modest science fiction novels chiefly set on distant planets in a cosmos with many inhabited planets in touch with each other. Her aim was always believable sympathetic characters, the protagonists usually young, and a good adventure story. Certain elements, such as a generous use of extrasensory perception and charming intelligent little animals (the future pet shop or animal hospital a favorite locale) became Norton hallmarks.

Then in *Witch World* and its successors she began to introduce witchcraft and magic (often based on ESP) and rather medieval cultures, but always with the plausible science-fiction background. *The Crystal Gryphon* carries this line of development to a remarkable peak. It is a tale of small feudal lords in a hill country somewhat like Scotland dotted with ill-omened ruins of the Old Ones and menaced by a monstrous invasion from overseas. It is soberly told in alternating first-person passages by the hero and heroine, Kerovan and Joisan, who have never met but for whom a marriage has been arranged. But family secrets and curses, and their own strong individualities and prides and duties, and plotting relatives and enemies, and the hard conditions of life—and the invasion—all stand in the way. The reader knowledgeable in science fiction soon suspects, although the author never quite confirms this, that the Old Ones had a highly technologic culture, that the ruins are dangerous (and sometimes *healing*) because of radio-activity, that the witchcraft

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is chiefly ESP and forgotten science, that the invaders are humanoid but allied with alien species, and that at least one of the family secrets—a hidden deformity—is the result of radiation-induced mutation or interbreeding with aliens.

But what a wealth of story sorts are skillfully merged here! —science fiction, sword and sorcery, the Gothic novel in its purest ancestral-curse form, the closely related damsel-in-distress story (though here, thank goodness, she's tough and resourceful as well as thoroughly virtuous), and the medieval romance of frustrated lovers who meet only at the happy end. This last element is quite reminiscent of the charming Old-French *chante-fable* of Aucassin and Nicolette, whose story is also told in alternating sections. Except that compared to Joisan's seriousness and grave little voice, Nicolette seems positively frivolous, as when she heals a man sick to death by lifting her pretty ermine frock and snowy linen smock and letting him glimpse her dainty ankle (so white daisies are black by contrast).

The language of the book is of an honest, straightforward, striding sort (no sudden sidesteps or serpentine loopings) that, without the roar and crash of some of Anderson's, creates the feeling of olden times very well. The words and names and expressions are simple, never jarringly modern, and those which help give the general feeling of eld (dalesman, oath-breaker, bride-refusal, Dame Math, Yngilda, Ulmsdale, Past-Abbess Malwinna, Year of the Spitting Toad, House Candle) never suggest too sharply a specific historic eld. They are clearly lifted from one or more historic times, largely the last two millennia of our western world, yet we can always imagine that the *equivalents* of such words might well exist (and situations to match) in some utterly foreign language on a planet light years away.

Andre Norton does all this with an appearance of ease and naturalness that is a measure of her art.

Again a good cover, moody and austere greens and browns, this one by Jack Gaughan.

THE RETURN OF KAVIN, by David Mason, Lancer, 1972, 95¢, 286 pp.

What I said of *Kavin's World* (FANTASTIC, Oct. 1970) applies to its sequel—another good, solid, salty job. Mason has advantages over most other sword-and-sorcery authors I've known or heard tell of: he has actually been a mercenary soldier and a merchant seaman for considerable periods of his life. He was casting the I-Ching sticks and reading them masterly (and organizing early communes) twenty years ago and more. He's a jackleg doctor, practices biofeedback and sleeps with a copy of *The White Goddess*

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(and a sprig of henbane, likely) at his bedside. Though his preference is for sailboats with auxilliary sweeps, he's lived on his own motorboats for most of the last ten years and had two sunk under him without warning—one, recently and sneakily, at dock, the other a few miles out in a particularly nasty bit of the Pacific south of Half Moon Bay (he and his pet wolf swam ashore; as Damon Knight once said of the multi-talented Ted Sturgeon, "*Damn* the man!").

As to be expected, his innovations in stories are down to earth, hairy-eared, and definite: dragonets suitable as pets, watchdogs, and pipe lighters, if you don't mind the risk; cannon that don't break the mood of sword and sorcery—because they're so primitive they're almost as apt to blow up the cannoneers as the enemy.

His prose marches too, though with sardonic asides and flarings of gallow's humor.

FROM ELFLAND TO POUGHKEEPSIE by Ursula K. LeGuin, Pendragon Press, 1973, $3.00, 50 pp.

This is the best essay I know of on the language of modern fantasy in general and sword and sorcery in particular—witty, judicious, scholarly, and all-inclusive, an excellent example of what an essay should be. In five or six thousand words Le Guin deftly orders the material for what could easily be a large book, or several.

She disposes of the 90 percent of all modern heroic fantasy that is crud (Sturgeon's Law) simply by referring stingingly to "all the endless Barbarians with names like Barp and Klod, and the Tarnsmen and the Klansmen and all the rest of them" and then going on to rebuke the better writers who show good intentions and some promise, but repeatedly make slips.

She begins by quoting a short conversation from a novel by a current writer of medieval fantasy whom I shall not name since I have not read him, and then cleverly demonstrating that the language is that of the journalists, not the true Lords of Elfland.

Now this struck me with redoubled force because a year ago another lady critic I trust had sent me a sample paragraph *from the same author*, complaining that its language was "book-club nonspecific medieval." I'll quote only one sentence from that paragraph (remember this is supposed to be spoken in an alternate-universe 12th-century Wales):

"He estimates that sixty per cent of the army was killed outright."

A Welsh fantasy lord of the 1100s using the decimal system, talking percentages and estimates? That's the language of sales reports and news flashes, not Elfland. (Actually, it's not quite that bad. Per cent needn't involve Arabic numerals, zero, and decimal points. The unabbreviated

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Latin *per centum* might have helped, or something like, "Of every hundred soldiers, threescore fell." But bad enough—when we talk of sixty per cent of the army we're not even dealing with individual flesh-and-blood men any more.)

Avoiding jarring anachronisms is the mark not only of the serious fantasy author but also of the writer of historical fiction who is trying to tell us what it felt like to live then, rather than merely seeking a colorful background for a book-club nonspecific cloak-and-sworder. For instance, in *I, Claudius* Robert Graves describes the Emperor Augustus' impotence with his wife Livia: "He knew that the marriage was impious: this knowledge, it seems, affected him nervously, putting an inner restraint on his flesh." How nicely this avoids Freudian or other psychiatric language! (There is another side to this. An author like Cabell in *Something About Eve*, or Erskine in *The Private Life of Helen of Troy*, or Robert Sherwood in his drama *The Road to Rome*, or Shaw in most of his historicals for that matter, may use crisply modern dialoge to demonstrate that the ancients weren't all that stuffy, in fact startlingly akin to us. But it must be done delicately; it seems to work best in comedy; and the grosser anachronisms are still *out*.)

Le Guin goes on to show how it should be done by giving conversations from the books of "three master stylists," Tolkien, Kenneth Morris, and Eric Rücker Eddison, the last of whom she designates as the man who did the archaic manner perfectly. "He really did write Elizabethan prose in the nineteen-thirties." I'm with her all the way there. Eddison did the Elizabethan-Jacobean thing so beautifully that the wonder is he didn't keep breaking into blank verse (*i.e.*, "Of every hundred soldiers, threescore fell.") whether hidden in paragraphs of seeming prose or printed in lines. His characters speak something closer to the prose Shakespeare's characters use when they are at their sharpest: the language of Iago, Rosalind, Portia, Shylock, and Hamlet in the Gravedigger's Scene; odd about Iago, when he becomes deliberately sententious or even when he thinks about himself, he drops into blank verse, but when he's really thinking, really using language as a weapon, he talks that incomparably incisive prose.

Eddison also links his language to the classics by borrowing from them unmistakable turns of speech: "wine-dark sea" Homer; "I ever was a fighter; so, one fight more." Browning; "Is it not brave, my Lord Gro, to dwell in Carcë? Is it not passing brave to be in Carcë, that lordeth it over all the earth?" Marlowe; "This was Gaslark's bane, whose enterprise of such pitch and moment have ended this, in a kind of noth-

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ing." Shakespeare and Webster. "Mine eyes dazzle." Webster again.

Le Guin quotes a longer passage from *The Worm Ouroboros*, where the corpse of Goryce XI is being carried on a bier of spears downhill in the dark, which exemplifies the striding quality of Eddison's language, most like the epic line of the Icelandic eddas, the poetry of the Gods. (And how strangely like it is her own fiction! "Rain-clouds over dark towers, rain falling in deep streets, a dark storm-beaten city of stone, through which one vein of gold winds slowly. First come merchants, potentates, and artisans of the City Erhenrang, rank after rank, magnificently clothed . . ." (the last five words a line of blank verse) That's from her *The Left Hand of Darkness*, a science-fiction novel set against the night of the Einstein limitations and in the cold of early polar explorations, and much of it told in the speech of the Lords of Elfland. Like Andre Norton, she has won high awards for her juveniles, and Hugos and Nebulas also.)

Le Guin discusses in some illustrative detail the pitfalls of fantasy writing in passages every ambitious writer and discriminating reader ought to read. For instance, hackneyed words such as eldritch and ichor. "You know ichor. It oozes out of severed tentacles, and beslimes tesselated pavements, and bespatters bejewelled courtiers, and bores the bejesus out of everybody." (Which also says something about the uses of alliteration and bewords.)

The overriding theme of her essay, which she states in many ways, each of them adding significantly to the definition, is (to choose a few): "In fantasy there is nothing but the writer's vision of his world." ". . . what Tolkien calls 'a secondary universe' . . ." ". . . . fantasy, which, instead of imitating the perceived confusion and complexity of existence, tries to hint at an order and clarity underlying existence . . ." "It is a journey into the subconscious mind, just as psychoanalysis is. Like psychoanalysis, it can be dangerous; and *it will change you.*" ". . . when fantasy is the real thing, nothing, after all, is realer." "There is only a construct built in the void, with every joint and seam and nail exposed."

I believe I agree unreservedly with all of these except the last. I believe that any and every good fantasy is linked to the "matrix of the commonplace" by its language and its author, and especially by the unavoidable *allusions* attached to the words of the one and the thoughts of the other. A true fantasy *is* a new creation in the void, but it comes from our feelings, is relevant to us, is not built at random as by computer, and has its ties with the commonplace. When I use a colloquialism, or even modern slang in a story of sword and sorcery, it's with the thought

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"Yes, they'd have a word for that in Elfland too" and the hope that the reader will experience the shock of recognition rather than have the magic carpet jerked from under him—and not from fear of being caught believing in my own creation. Though that last is an ever-present danger for fantasy writers, as is the temptation to jerk carpets. Lord Dunsany (most inimitable of fantasy authors, as Le Guin says) abandoned the dead seriousness of *A Dreamer's Tales* and *The First Book of Wonder* for the Jorkins stories, in which lesser marvels are kidded as the extravagant fictions of a British Baron Munchausen. While I am also almost always disappointed by the thoroughness with which Cabell brings down to earth the high romanticism of his Jurgens and Horvendiles, the cream of the jest being that it's all something glimpsed in the deluxe cover of his wife's cold cream jar. I sometimes wonder if Lovecraft hadn't these two in mind, especially Cabell, when he wrote of his Randolph Carter, in "The Silver Key," that "They were very graceful novels, in which he urbanely laughed at the dreams he lightly sketched; but he saw that their sophistication had sapped all their life away."

And yet, to be fair, my reservations to fantasy being "only a construct built in the void" may chiefly represent my own fears of breaking all ties with reality and recklessly plunging into the subconscious when I write fantasy myself. More specifically, my fear that my fantasy may lose all relevance and passion (becoming cryptically abstract) unless I moor it to myself (but why visibly?) every once in a while. There's room for much argument here.

As for how even the most distanced fantasy is yet tied to the author's topical thoughts and feelings, well, when I read *The Lord of the Rings* I cannot forget that the work was composed between 1936 and 1949 when England was facing the greatest threat of all to her existence, and that the flat, unanalyzed evil of Sauron is the two-dimensional all-black image we have of the enemy in any total war. Yet, again to try to be fair, this is pure deduction on my part. Nowhere in the work does Tolkien refer directly or indirectly to the Nazis; there are, needless to say, no slips of that sort. Perhaps, as I showed in my review of Dave Mason's book, I am simply too curious about the private lives of authors, ignoring the rule that their creations should be considered quite independently. (I am the sort of person who will always be acutely curious as to whether, and to what degree, if at all, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle tried out cocaine and morphine on himself, during his weary months as a young doctor waiting for the droves of patients that never came, before making those drugs an early addiction of Sherlock Holmes.)

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Well, at all events I've made it clear that Le Guin's essay has forced me to reexamine my own writing, which is surely the highest praise—something which goes also to Vonda N. McIntyre for her charming and informative introduction, and to the publishers. This is the first book published by Pendragon Press—a notable first!—in an edition of 776 numbered copies happily designated as "first printing" indicating it should never be out of stock for long. Their address is Box 14834, Portland, Oregon 97214. Equally noteworthy in format and contents is the new Lovecraftian quarterly *Whispers*, edited by Stuart D. Schiff and devoted to articles about and stories of supernatural horror by such writers as Gahan Wilson, Manly Wade Wellman, E. Hoffman Price, James Sallis, Joseph Payne Brennan, Brian Lumley, and the new Lovecraft scholar Professor Dirk W. Mosig, a German-born American, who first read Lovecraft in Spanish translation in Buenos Aires, believe it or not! The third issue, featuring the charmingly grisly art of Lee Brown Coye, made me exclaim, "Here's *Weird Tales* come again!" One of Lovecraft's characters, in the short story "The Unnameable," contributed to a magazine called *Whispers*. However strangely, this appears to be it! *Whispers*' address is 5508 Dodge Drive, Fayetteville, North Carolina 28303. $1.50 per copy; yearly (4 issues) $5.50.

—FRITZ LEIBER

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Best Fan Magazine: a tie between *Algol* and *Alien Critic*

Best Fan Writer: Susan Wood (Glicksohn)

Best Fan Artist: Tim Kirk

Special Award (from the Convention Committee): Chesley Bonestell

IN ADDITION to the Hugo Awards two others were of note: The second John W. Campbell Award for new writers went (in a tie) to Lisa Tuttle and Spider Robinson. And the first annual Gandolf Award, created in honor of J.R.R. Tolkien, was awarded posthumously to Tolkien himself. (Although described as an award to honor *living* authors of fantasy, it was not inappropriate that the first such award went to the man in whose name it was created. Hopefully, the business of honoring living fantasy authors will commence next year.)

My feelings on these awards were, like those of most I know, mixed. I was quite pleased to see many authors who found their beginning here in FANTASTIC and our companion magazine, AMAZING, honored. I was particularly pleased for Susan Wood (formerly Susan Glicksohn), whose column of fanzine reviews, *The Clubhouse*, is now a regular feature in AMAZING. I was, of course, disappointed not to win the Best Editor award, but after watching AMAZING come in third (during the time the award honored magazines) every year it was eligible under my editorship, and after placing third last year myself (the first year of the Best Editor award), I was not surprised. As a columnist for both *Algol* and *Alien Critic*, I was delighted with their dual win, and especially pleased for *Algol* editor/publisher Andy Porter, for whom this is a long-overdue first Hugo (*Alien Critic* editor/publisher Dick Geis can add this Hugo to several already on his shelf for the defunct *SFReview*). The only disappointment in the Hugo to *The Sleeper* was the fact that Woody Allen did not appear to claim the award himself.

However, it must be said—and no doubt in saying it I will call down mountains of criticism upon my head—that the fan and professional artist awards are no longer meaningful, Tim Kirk and Kelly Freas having apparently sewed them up on a permanent basis. A number of people believe that Kirk, at least (whose activities in the professional arena better qualify him to contest the professional award with Freas) should refuse future nominations for the Fan Artist Hugo and open that category to the many deserving others. I'm told that Kirk has adamantly refused to take this course of action in the past, but with four Hugos sitting on his mantel now, I hope he will reconsider; he now has half the total number of Hugos awarded in this category. And although the Professional Artist Hugo has been awarded over a much longer period of time, Freas now has seven of them, awarded over nearly the entire history of the Hugo Awards.

What is disturbing about the Hugo Awards is that to a great extent they represent popularity awards given largely on the basis of exposure. "Best" artists, writers, etc., whose work is not given major exposure stand little chance of nomination, much less of receiving the award itself. Yet, the Hugo Awards represent the broadest, and undoubtedly the best-informed voting base (as well as the longest continuous tradition) of any of the awards now proliferating in the stf field. Nine hundred thirty ballots were cast this year.

It will be interesting to watch the development and growth of the Gandolf Awards. Thus far they have been restricted to a single "Grand Master of

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Fantasy'' award. Whether they will open up into an award structure parallel to the Hugos (something fantasy aficionados have been clamoring for, for years) is something only Lin Carter and his fellow trustees of the award can determine. I would hope so. Since the voting is conducted in conjunction with the Hugo balloting, by the Worldcon membership as a whole, the awards have an undenied potential to become ''the Hugos of fantasy''

In the con-site voting for 1976, the winner was Kansas City. This coming year (1975) the Worldcon will be held in Australia. Unfortunately, I have no details on hand about membership fees, etc., but I'll try to remedy that in an upcoming issue.

THAT CONAN COMICS REVIEW: Recently I received the latest of a number of letters which have all asked the same question. This one came from William Mills, of Eau Claire, Wisconsin, and here it is:

Dear Mr. White,

Some number of months ago, you wondered in your editorial why a certain issue of FANTASTIC, featuring a Conan cover by Jeff Jones, sold much better than average. Answering your own question, you postulated that it was the presence of a new Conan story which did the trick.

Maybe. But I think—and I think you know—that the real reason was the fact that Roy Thomas plugged your magazine in Marvel's *Conan* comic, advising that the issue would review Marvel's book. If even a tiny fraction of *Conan*'s readership latched onto the mag, as I did, it figures to have boosted your figures considerably.

So would you *please* run that review, already? For over a year I've been waiting (and I'll be others have been too). All you gave us was teasers, and by now—with the publication of a *3rd* new Conan story and still no *Conan* review—I've had it. I won't be buying any more issues of FANTASTIC until such time as I see the review in one of them. I hope it'll be soon. I like FANTASTIC. But I think you're far overdue as regards fulfilling your promise to Roy Thomas and all *Conan* readers.

HE'S RIGHT, of course. And it is perhaps appropriate that we've got another Conan story this issue.

When I wrote Roy (who is a friend of long standing) the letter he published in *Conan*, I had every intention of fulfilling my promise. And I regret very much that I have not—and cannot. Here's why:

At the time I planned the review, our *Fantasy Books* reviewer, Fritz Leiber, was taking a vacation of unspecified length and I was filling in for him with occasional reviews in the department. The issue of FANTASTIC to which reader Mills is referring was, by no coincidence, our 20th Anniversary Issue, and it was with some pride and pleasure that I scheduled for that issue the first of the new Conan stories, and commissioned a cover from Jeff Jones. I planned a lengthy review of all the issues of the *Conan* comics then published in conjunction with that issue. However, at that point Fritz returned with a new *Fantasy Books* column, and both the Publisher and I felt that his return took precedence—and, indeed, was especially appropriate for the 20th anniversary of this magazine, a magazine with which Fritz Leiber has long been honorably associated.

Why, you may be asking, did I not run *both* the Leiber column and my own review? The answer is space. We simply did not have the space. Although this magazine has become known, under my editorship, for its fea-

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tures the fact is that we can devote only limited space to our non-fiction (and when rising costs, etc., dictate a reduction in pages or wordage, the cuts have to take place among the features since the fiction remains our primary concern as well as that of most readers). It came down to this: one piece or the other. I had only roughed out the *Conan* review, and expected to be able to run it in a subsequent issue. So it was left out.

That was in 1972. That fall, the bottom fell out of comics distribution locally. Issues stopped appearing regularly. It was a impossible to maintain consecutive strings of titles. Although I've been a comics fan for as long as I've been a stf fan, I had to throw up my hands. I found myself keeping long detailed lists in my pocket of what I had and what I'd missed, and the misses were outnumbering the purchases. I had to make a basic decision: should I continue compulsively acquiring complete runs of most of the comics being published, keeping up with new titles as well? Should I continue devoting a sizable portion of my week to driving over much of Northern Virginia and Washington, D.C., in search of these comics?

I decided that I had let a collecting mania overpower me: that I was a slave to compulsion and that it was destroying my appreciation for those comics I did acquire. And I decided that if I was going to make a break, it could not be selective—there was no way to be selective. Inasmuch as titles were appearing totally at random in various outlets, even an attempt to maintain a run of a *few* titles would require as much outlay of time and energy (if less money) as would my prior attempts to find them *all*.

So I stopped. Cold turkey. If I saw a comic at a stand whereat I was already browsing, and it contained the work of an artist who interested me (say, Walt Simonson), I might buy it, but I ceased to keep lists and I ceased totally to keep up with any one title.

Thus, as time passed my *Conan* review became increasingly dated and irrelevant, especially inasmuch as the *Conan* comics told a roughly continuous story. The *King Kull* comics (which were related to some extent) ceased to appear here at all. The Marvel black & white comics with Conan never appeared here. Etc.

Thus, I have become incompetent to write the review as I envisioned it. And, as the number of issues necessary to a complete review has mounted over the years, even the thought of acquiring them all from dealers has become quelling.

So: there will be no *Conan* comics review by me here.

However, I do not rule out the possibility of such a review, *by another author*. I would like very much to see one from any fan or professional Conan/comics critic who cares to write one, and should I find one which meets my standards, I will be happy to buy and publish it.

But I must make clear that I am not looking for a fawning-accolyte approach. I am looking for solid, reasoned criticism from someone who a) knows his Conan; b) is knowledgable in both the fields of heroic fantasy and comics, and understands the realities of both; c) and is willing to devote his energies to a critical essay in which the faults and virtues of both writing and art are discussed and weighed. This is not an easy task, and with the passage of time (and new additions to the *Conan* comics library) it will grow no easier.

POLITICAL POSTSCRIPT: Last month, in AMAZING SF, I wrote what I thought—hoped—would be my last editorial on the subject of Richard M. Nixon and

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United States politics. In that editorial I said, "I want to make a few predictions—predictions you can check me out on a few years from now. I would be happy to see them proved wrong." Then I offered as my first prediction, the following:

"1. Richard Nixon will never stand trial. If the Special Prosecutor moves for his indictment, Nixon will leave the country—perhaps joining Robert Vesco in exile, safe from extradition. He will be financed by his pals, Abplanalp and Rebozo, who will liquidate his assets in this country (most of which will turn out to be in their names or in their control anyway)."

I wrote that in August, 1974. On September 8th, President Ford issued Mr. Nixon a full pardon, in advance of either indictment or trial. Mr. Nixon expressed little contrition for his deeds, declaring his only mistake to have been not acting "decisively" enough on Watergate. Inasmuch as Mr. Nixon's own tapes, especially those of June 23rd, 1972, make it quite clear that he did indeed act "decisively" on Watergate, masterminding its coverup with orders for "stonewalling" and perjury, this comes as a remarkably insincere remark from the man.

So—as much to my surprise as anyone's (especially those who recall Mr. Ford's statement that he would let the judicial process take its course before considering a pardon), my first prediction has already been fulfilled. Richard Nixon will never stand trial.

This is a shocking turn of events, as much so to those who were not convinced of Mr. Nixon's guilt as to those who were. Mr. Ford has, gratuitously, set a dangerous precident. He has aborted the judicial process. The facts of the case will now never be established in a court of law. Mr. Nixon's involvement in criminal matters, although circumstancially obvious (his own tapes damn him), will never be proven or disproven. The matter will never be set to rest. Mr. Nixon admits nothing; even now he will not come clean to the American public. This is profoundly disturbing. It is the worst possible outcome of a difficult situation. And it is totally unjustified.

Like a great many other Americans, I sent a telegram of protest to President Ford. The response I found in talking to shoppeople and other "ordinary citizens" in this area was uniformly grim:

"They made a deal," was the most common statement, cynical and worldly-wise, "probably before Nixon resigned."

"Ford's just another one."

"He's Nixon's man—what did you expect?"

"Those guys'll all take care of each other."

There is much anger and a sense of smoldering frustration. You can't beat the system. This president is no more honest than the last. They're all in it together.

These are dangerous sentiments to be abroad in this country today. We have a totally unelected president, whose constituency exists only by courtesy. Already I have heard talk about the need to start new impeachment proceedings ("They did it once; it wasn't so hard . . ."). Can Mr. Ford govern this country if he loses the confidence of a sizable part of its citizenry?

The letters, telegrams and phone calls poured in to the White House. They were heavily opposed to the precipitous pardon. Mr. Ford's reaction—apparently reasoning that two Wrongs might make everything Right—was to leak the news that he was planning pardons for everyone else connected with Watergate.

The man may soon be a president without a country. We are all losers.

—TED WHITE

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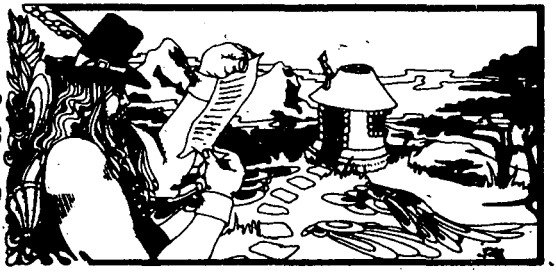

Letters intended for publication should be typed, double-spaced, on one side of each sheet, and addressed to According To You, *Box 409, Falls Church, Va., 22046.*

Dear Ted:

I've been meaning to write this for a long time, and all the dread rumors of doom for the senior sci-fi rags has gotten me off my duff. Your prozines are the only ones I read anymore, because of the non-fiction features which remain the domain of the true magazine and because of the sword and sorcery in FANTASTIC (asinine though that second reason may be, it's a fact). If not for those two factors, I'd leave your magazines on the racks with the rest, and stick to the paperbacks which hold up better and have a trade-in value at the used book stores. (After I buy two new books and read them, I trade them for one used book, then buy another new one and eventually trade these two for another old one, and continue that process without end. Magazines crumble, bend, and are generally treated with disrespect, and I can't bring myself to trade my well treated ones for beat up copies. Aren't you thrilled about that? Well, it *is* a minor reason in the pot for paperbacks out-distancing the magazines. Magazines aren't worthy trading (Except really old ones.)

Anywhy, there are still several things about your rags that fall short of pleasing me, things I'll have to weigh when my long term subscription eventually runs out and I have to consider shelling out some more. As I write this, I'm thinking I'll continue my sub to FANTASTIC only, but that's not a decision I have to make soon. (You should have warned everyone specifically when the price hike was coming, so they could subscribe under the wire.)

So here are some of my opinions as to the illnesses and possible cures as to certain aspects of the two rags. (Not all my opinions are valid outside the realm of my own being. For instance, I thought *Frankenstein Unbound* was a rancid little bit of trivia full of obvious inconsistancies which I will list for anyone sending me an SASE, using the common bait of a classic horror character to attract readers who might otherwise stick to comics, hastilly written in a vein that smacks of A. E. Van Vogt as his least logical. But everybody else seems to dig it. I also thought the last Conan novelet was the first Carter-de Camp pastiche that built Conan, and even Thoth-Amon, as believable and human, possibly because of their being depicted with encroaching years. Others, however, assure me it

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was the same hackneye drivel as before. I regress.) Onward:

Ailment: Too many of the novels appear too soon in paperback form. Sometimes a serialized novel is on the stands before my subscription copies have arrived. I don't like this, I feel I'm wasting some of my money, and newstand purchases can become more attractive if it becomes imperative to skip issues with serialized novels. Why wait two months for part two if I can get the whole thing in one month?

Medicine: Cease running novels you can't hold first printing rights to, exclusively, until about four months after the last portion appears. Or skip the novels.

Ailment: You seem to be allergic to novelets, possibly because four short-shorts look better on the contents page than two meatier stories. Malzberg and Bunch vignettes get tedious after a while, excellent though these authors are. There are too few stories with substance, too large a selection of quickie fillers.

Medicine: The really enjoyable yarns have been the novelets (and the novelets you pawn off as "short novels complete in one issue"). By quitting the novels that'll be on the newstand in paperback form the same time your two rags are peddling the same thing on the magazine racks, you could increase space for novelets without having to abbreviate the contents listing.

Ailment: Hard fantasy, allegorical fantasy, victorian-author types of fantasy, have yet to play even a minor roll in FANTASTIC and, if not for the sword and sorcery, FANTASTIC would merely be a soft sci-fi magazine. Are you still afraid to go all the way? Or do you have a natural aversion to anything that's purely fantasy? The two magazines still lack individual identities, though they have improved in this aspect in recent years.

Medicine: Go all-out fantasy with FANTASTIC, not just soft sci-fi and borderline stuff, don't just publish one magazine with alternating titles. I'm not a great fan of Lovecraftian fiction, but it seems you're missing a big commercial bet by not splashing "Cthulhu" on the cover in the same way you do "Conan." Such commercialism could suck readers into getting into the more original and important pieces that'd come with the package.

Ailment: If your previous editorials prove true in their statements, the new price will lower readership and possibly prove fatal. I find the price acceptable, having been prepared for it, but from your own lips it could mean the end.

Medicine: There may be no cure. But it might be time for something radical, a real gamble, a big change. I mean in format. If the price must go up, send it way up, make a dollar magazine, shape it like *Vertex* or *Witchcraft and Sorcery* or the old sized *Analog*. Not both magazines, maybe just one, experimentally. If death is a real possibility, why not go out with a bang, and possibly win yourself a life saving transfusion of golden globuals for the effort. Think of the whiz of a good time you could have with art and layout if you had big double pages to work with, and no end to the room for possible non-fiction features and guest editorials. Non-fiction remains mostly the province of magazines, but in your present pocket size the space for non-fiction is limited. But in a

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standard magazine (non-pulp) size, you could go insian with features without losing a word of fiction. (I'm presuming non-fiction would be both easier and cheaper to latch on to, especially when only limited circulation fanzines are really into it and you'd have no competition for good fact articals, commentaries, interviews, reviews and what-have-you.)

Those are some of the things that have been rattling around in my head for a while. Maybe one or two points can rattle around in yours for a while.

AMOS SALMONSON
Box 89517
Zenith WA 98188

Okay, Amos, you've raised some good points and they deserve comment. 1. The novels: We try to arrange with the publishers of these novels in book form (either directly or through the agent in question) for their publication to occur as long as possible after ours. Sometimes there have been slipups, rarely of our doing. I can't, off-hand, think of any novels which have been published in book form before we published the concluding instalment. (A John Brunner novelette *did come out as part of an Ace Special several years ago in the same month we published it, but that hardly applies to your criticism.) Indeed, a number of the novels we've serialized have yet to be published in any other form. We buy* first serial rights—*the right to publish a story in magazine form for the first time—and we buy no book rights and thus have no legal control over book publication. 2. I try to alternate issues with novelettes with those which contain serials. 3. We publish the total spectrum of fantasy, and this has on occasion included Victorian-style fantasy. Unfortunately, if the letters I receive are any indication, these stories are the least favorably received. (Nor can I ignore the failure of* Forgotten Fantasy, Coven 13, *and the other so-called "pure fantasy" magazines.) Nonetheless, I feel that this magazine has a very separate identity from that of its companion magazine,* AMAZING SF—*that, in fact, precisely because we publish such a broad spectrum of fiction* FANTASTIC *is, as Barry Malzberg said in a recent issue of* Outworlds, *"the best s-f magazine published today." Where else, after all, could you find a story like "The Kozmic Kid" cheek-to-jowl with a Conan story? 4. I'd love to do exactly as you suggest with either one or both magazines—change the package, initiate really fresh (but readable) graphics, etc.—but the decision to go that route is not in my hands, and thus far the Publisher has remained dubious about its chances for sales success. 'Going out with a bang' is all very well, but we'd rather not "go out" at all.*—TW

Dear Ted,

Sprague deCamp's article on William Morris was as interesting as any of his previous pieces, and I quite agree with his criticisms. I have been saying the same thing about Morris' plotting inabilities for some time now, and have been drawing the wrath of Morris devotees for it.

However, there a couple of serious omissions in the piece. The most important is the complete failure to mention Morris' early prose romances. When Morris was in his twenties he wrote a series of short medieval tales for the *Oxford & Cambridge* magazine. This was a student run publication, similar to

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the "little" magazines of today. Morris was a frequent contributor and appeared in all issues except for June and November 1856. He wrote for them several poems, an essay, a mainstream story, and seven fantasy romances. These were the first heroic fantasy tales ever written. They aren't completely forgotten either, as "The Hollow Land", appeared in *Forgotten Fantasy* and has also been reprinted by Ballatine books. "Lindenborg Pool" was reprinted in *Weird Tales* c. 1928.

Like most of Morris' work, the stories make little sense plotwise, but they are shorter, and their style is clearer and easier to read. Morris has not yet developed his "and then another ant carried away a piece of sand" approach, and these shorter pieces (mostly novelets) are probably the best prose he ever wrote. The best three are "The Hollow Land," "Gertha's Lovers" and "Lindenborg Pool." "Gertha's Lovers" is basically straight medieval adventure and the only fantasy element is a ghost who shows up for about a page to straighten out some snags in the plot. "Lindenborg Pool" is about a guy who dreams himself into and finds himself in the role of a priest who is going to administer the sacraments to a dying man. However, it turns out that all is a blasphemous joke pulled by a gang of atheists, who defile the Eucharist, trick the priest into hearing the confession of a pig, and hold an orgy which quite offends the good cleric's ideas on morality. Finally, in a display of un-saintly sword swinging, the priest escapes, and wakes up in the 19th century as the author. All this was caused by the enchanted pool of the title into which the author gazed. The story is certainly the best prose Morris ever wrote. It's marvelously atmospheric, and the desolate wasteland around the pool is skillfully evoked. Furthermore, there are no gaping holes in the plot.

"The Hollow Land" is more of a traditional heroic fantasy, complete with a hidden paradise (complete with a beautiful girl living therein), lots of action, and heavy supernaturalism. If you want to be a purist, this is the first sword & sorcery story as we know it, and the date of publication is September-October, 1856. (It was a two-part serial.) Also there is a story called "Golden Wings" which has fascinated some people, especially those who profess to understand it. I could never make head nor tail out of it.

All these stories can be found in an out of print but very common book called *Early Romances* (Everyman's Library c. 1910 and subsequent printings) which can be found in any well-stocked library. This was a rather serious omission on Sprague's part, I think, and a less important one is failure to mention another novel length romance, *Child Christopher* (1895). This is sort of a rewrite of the medieval legend of Havelok the Dane. Prince Christopher as an infant is kicked out by a vile and ambitious regent, and forced to live among the peasants. After the usual swearings of fealty and the inevitable revolt of the peasants, Christopher is restored to his throne, as we all knew he would be by page2. The story is actually deadly dull, without conflict, overlong, and not worth reading. However, it's easier going than *The House of The Wolflings*, where much of the dialogue is in verse.

DARRELL SCHWEITZER
113 Deepdale Rd.
Strafford, Pa., 19087

Dear Ted,

I was delighted to see L. Sprague de Camp giving just credit to one of my

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heroes, William Morris, in the Sept. FANTASTIC. He did a fine job, on the whole, though I have a few nits to pick.

First of all, I think he gives a false picture of the Pre-Raphaelites as painters when he says "they were trying to do what color photography now does better." Here he seems to have swallowed Ruskin's propaganda for the Pre-Raphaelites instead of looking at the actual pictures done by this group. Ruskin made much of how the "Brotherhood" painted nature, adding nothing, arranging nothing, and subtracting nothing, but in fact none of the Pre-Raphaelites (and particularly not the hard-core original trio, Rossetti, Millais and Hunt) ever attained the degree of "photographic realism" that was fairly common among the painters of that era. One can mistake the paintings of Alma-Tedema, Gerome, Egg, or Dyson for photographs; in fact they are better than photographs, in that they take advantage of the fact that the painter's eye is more sensitive to extremes of light intensity than even the best modern film.

The paintings of the Pre-Raphaelites are instead instantly recognizable for their dreamlike atmosphere. Mrs. Morris, who appears in so many of them, always seems to be half asleep or drugged, and nine times out of ten the time is either dusk or dawn. When, as in Holman Hunt's paintings of religious subjects, the time is high noon, it is a high noon seen by someone with a high fever; everyone is frozen in a hard strange light, as if under a spell. It is not for nothing that Salvador Dali has said, "I have done no more than attempt to be a late Pre-Raphaelite."

Second, I think de Camp underestimates Morris' philosophical consistency. Yes, Morris was a capitalist and a socialist at the same time. No, this was not unusual. So was Robert Owen. So, come to think of it, was Engles, co-author of *Das Kapital*. It is no secret that before the Russian revolution socialism was largely a middle-class movement.

And third, de Camp never touches on the fundamental philosophical attitude that is exemplified in Morris and the Pre-Raphaelites, the attitude that all the arts are one, and that one is Imagination. I quote from Ruskin's *Modern Painters:* "The highest art is purely imaginative, all its materials being wrought into their form by invention."

It is this attitude that underlies Morris' astounding versatility—and his socialism. Everything is a potential medium for the artist-craftsman, including human society itself. And it is this attitude that constitutes Morris' real legacy to modern science-fiction and fantasy.

R. FARADAY NELSON
El Cerrito, Ca.l 94530

Nelson is the author of "The City of the Crocodile" (March, 1974) and "A Song on the Rising Wind" (November, 1974). –TW

Dear Mr. White:

I've always admired the fact that you, almost alone among present day science fiction editors, were willing to mention your competitors by name and that you allowed your readers to do the same. Recently two of your competitors—*Galaxy* and *If*—acquired a new editor, and in his "New Editor's Introductory All-Star Issue" of *If*, James Baen published a letter by one Nicholas Grimshawe in which you were put down (although not by name) for your "snobby editorial feel and cry-baby attitude."

Frankly, I have a hard time believing in "Grimshawe." His letter was based on the (advance) knowledge that Baen

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was the new editor (unlike other letters, addressed to the previous editor), and carried no address. Most of the things he requested are the policies Baen says he intends to bring to the magazines. I'm wondering if in fact "Grimshawe" isn't editor Baen—and I'm also wondering what you make of the slam?

WILLIAM SPEER
16 West 16th St.
New York, N.Y., 10011

Very little, actually–to answer your last question first. In a subsequent issue, Jim published a letter by Roy Schenck (whose letters have appeared here on occasion) which passingly rebutted Grimshawe, and commented, "Grimshawe's comments on Ted White: I censored neither Grimshawe–nor Schenck". Inasmuch as it has been It's policy not to publish the addresses of letter writers except when requested, I wouldn't refine too much of the lack of address in this case. As for naming our "competitors," I admired Ray Palmer for dispensing with the usual coy euphemisms and naming other stf magazines and their editors when he was editor/publisher of Other Worlds *in the early fifties, and I have followed his example. It would appear Baen is doing the same; I applaud. More important: I do not consider* Galaxy, *If, F&SF, Analog or* Vertex *to be our competitors. I have never seen any facts or figures which would indicate that a drop in one magazine's sales helped boost those of another in our field. Quite the contrary: as the total number of stf magazines has fallen the remaining magazines have had a harder time of it. We-the magazines-are a community, and a shrinking one. The latest word (at the Discon) was that before you read this* If *will be merged with* Galaxy, *thus diminishing our community yet further. I take no pleasure in this news and hope that a reversal of this trend will occur before our field consists of titles numbered on the fingers of one hand. What Nicholas Grimshawe saw as a "cry-baby attitude" is a very real concern on my part for the health of the stf magazine community as a whole: we all suffer from the same problems. For more on this subject, look for my editorial in next month's* AMAZING SF: *"Things To Come."–TW*

Dear Ted,

Just got the September FANTASTIC and have enjoyed it more than most issues of the magazine. I'm a T.B. Swann fan also and have always been a sucker for stories set in classical times. I also had to suffer through Herrick's poetry in English lit. (I prefered Donne). Maybe I should have paid more attention but English was never one of my favorite subjects even though I never had any trouble with it. It's just that I never liked "great" literature except for a very few works. I think I'd nominate *The Mill in the Floss* as my least favorite book.

I was amused by Monteleone's story. I think all his beginning writers looked at vintage *Twilight Zone* episodes. Of course I know I've read the same SF story several times and so it would seem to pay. Look at all the writers who copy E.R. Burroughs; and "dying Earth" stories are beginning to sound alike. Personally I think Jack Vance is the only writer who is successful in this genre (I'm suffering through The Pastel City at the moment); however, Brunner's *Catch a Falling Star* is the best "dying Earth" story in my opinion. It has an up ending too—very different from modern Brunner.

Gordon Eklund's story was interesting. He still doesn't seem to be in complete control of his stories but is improv-

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ing. I'm a sucker for parallel worlds stories anyway. I'm also glad to see that I'm not the only person who doesn't like Malzberg. Still I can't expect everyone to agree with my taste. I don't feel I'm wasting my money on your 'zines.

LYNNE HOLDON
51 Leonard Place
Wayne, N.J., 07470

Dear Mr. White

I fear you are wrong about *Star Trek* as an animated show being an "indication of what the network thinks of it and its audience." First of all, according to an article in *Show* magazine several months ago, the decision to put *ST* in animation was made by Paramount which has half-rights to the series, and reluctantly agreed to by Roddenberry with the stipulation that he have creative control. Secondly, the networks are in a "lock-step" that animated shows must come on Saturday mornings—the kiddie ghetto; so however good *Star Trek* might be as an animated program, the context in which it appears (including the commercials) detracts from the non-kiddie quality. Thirdly, as a corollary, the TV reviewer for *Variety* cited *Star Trek* as an *exception* to the generally-low level of Saturday morning programs.

All that isn't to say that you as a founding member of STING—Star Trek Is No Good—like or should like the animated show any better than you did the live-action; it is not to say the animation is every bit as good as the live-action or that *Star Trek* fans applaud it unanimously (an acquaintance won't watch it because of "discrepancies")—it is simply to suggest that the fact *Star Trek* now appears as an animated programs really indicates very little about anybody's or any organizations's "attitude" toward audiences or anyone else.

A few years ago, a reader expressed some rather harsh remarks about the ethics of book-reviewers—remarks to which you made quite definite disagreement.

A few days ago in a used-book shop, I picked up some back issues of science-fiction/fantasy magazines, including the February 1974 issue of AMAZING and the January 1974 issue of *Galaxy*.

Both these magazines—which came out approximately the same time—have reviews of *H.G. Wells: Critic of Progress*, by Jack Williamson. But what a contrast in the reviews!

The review in AMAZING is by Cy Chauvin, who says the book will make "everyone but the most dedicated reader fall asleep with boredom," is "very dry and boring," and that he "can't recommend" the book.

The *Galaxy* review is by Theodore Sturgeon, who says the book is "well thought-out and well written," a "cornerstone volume," "clear, careful, reliable."

Both men are qualified reviewers. Both have opinions that are valid for them. Both read the book—yet to one, the book is "dry and boring," to the other, "well thought-out and well-written." (Chauvin agrees that Williamson has something important to say, but I think we have unanimous agreement that "boring" and "well-written" are mutually exclusive concepts).

All this would be fine, and is fine, if one is reading book reviews for fun. Unfortunately, the reader using book reviews as a guide to buying loses: he reads *Galaxy*, pays $5.95 to Mirage Press, and finds the book is so dull it puts him to sleep. He reads AMAZING, decides the book isn't worth the trouble, and misses out on a well-written cornerstone volume. Or he reads both reviews and can't make up his mind at all. Now me . . . I have no problem

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whatsoever regarding *H.G. Wells*; I have the issues of *Riverside Quarterly* the book originally appeared in; but for others, it seems an almost insoluable problem and, I guess, one has to follow one's instincts.

Thomas F. Monteleone's story "Present Perfect" brought some questions to mind soon after I read it.

I am aware that certain ideas and plots are old-hat in science-fiction and fantasy, such as the last-survivors-are-Adam-and-Eve story.

Imagine an eager novice of writer. He has read a lot of sf. He tries to think of a plot and into his head comes an idea . . . they turn out to be Adam and Eve. Now, consider this a moment: *He will never have read such a story in any sf magazine or anthology*—the editors won't buy them! And, alas, he has not read Thomas Monteleone's helpful story. Is he not, then, justified in that context, in believing that he has an original idea?

So my question: are there plots and stories that a really good sf writer *instinctively* stays away from? Stories that, without ever having read so, he realizes he never has seen because they are too-often submitted, not too-seldom?

I presume you've got this story: There are only two survivors of a space ship. One is named Adam; the other is named . . ah . . Little Joe.

J. WAYNE SADLER
322 East Adams Street
Jacksonville, Florida 32202

"Well written" refers to the quality of the prose–that it is not clumsy or inept, that it says what the author intends it to say. "Boring" is a value-judgment on the effect of both content and writing, taken in sum. There is no intrinsic conflict in these two descriptions of the same book, although they reveal very different tastes and reactions. As for the Adam-and-Eve plot and similar plots, a good rule of thumb might be to avoid plots which depend upon such pseudo-profound revelations for their punchlines. (Another is the alien who brings peace and brotherhood to Earth and is crucified for his troubles. His name is Qreist . . .) Any author who wants to make a valid story out fo such a plot will use the idea as the starting point *of his story and not as his punchline, and will treat his characters as well-rounded individuals out of whom the story grows organically. The real problem with beginners' stories is the reliance upon gimmicks instead of character-development and plot-resolution.*—TW

Dear Mr. White,

I usually don't by SF or Fantasy magazines. I normally wait till the material comes out in book form. The novel in the September issue of FANTASTIC looked too good to wait for, however. Before I got to the novel, though, I cruised through the letters and that brings me to the point of this letter.

I just want to congratulate you on your answer to Eric Hackenborg. You wrote the funniest and truest thing I have ever read about *Star Trek*. I am referring to the fact that NBC's revival of *Star Trek* as a children's cartoon was an indication of their opinion of the show and its audience. I don't really want to put the show down. In fact, I think the concept of the program was great. It just didn't seem to go down on film well. Many people are touchy about this and I don't want to open any old wounds.

Also, kudos to Jeff Jones on the cover painting. I wish the story that went with it was as good. It was like a joke that someone forgot the punchline to.

J.G. SATTLER
627 N. 27 St.
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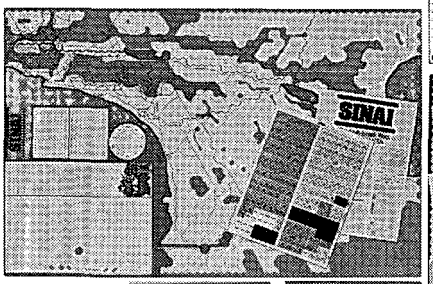

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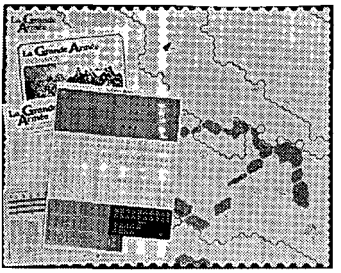

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